ALL STORIES NEW!

Red Seal WESTERN

10¢

DECEMBER

An ACE Magazine

3 BIG NOVELS

THE GAUCHO GUNHAWK
By CLAUDE RISTER

HAIR-TRIGGER LEGION
By J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

DYNAMITE RANGE
By JACK DRUMMOND

plus

TOPHAND SHORT STORIES

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L. W. SWEET
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Splendid Chance To Make Up To $60.00 in a Week

If you want an unusual opportunity to make a fine cash income operating a Coffee Agency right in your locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—FREE.

This opportunity is open to one person—man or woman—in each locality, or two persons operating in partnership. Local Coffee Agency is ideally suited for married couples; wife takes care of orders and handles calls at home, while husband delivers and collects. Earnings start very first day. Prosperous business of 200 regular customers quickly developed through remarkable, tested plan.

START EARNING AT ONCE

I'll send you everything you need—your complete outfit containing full-size packages of products, also printed forms, blanks, advertising matter, samples, etc., together with simple, proven plans showing exactly what to do to make good money right from the start. Make as high as $45.00 your very first week. Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Cocoa, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Cosmetics, Soaps, Toilet Goods, and other food products and similar daily necessities. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

FORD CARS GIVEN

Over and above the cash earnings you make, I offer you a brand new Ford Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. I offer a Ford Car—as an extra reward—to everyone who starts in this business.

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

You can start a Coffee Agency and make money the first week. You don't have to risk a cent. I absolutely guarantee this. No experience is needed. You use your home as headquarters. You can build your business on my money. Full details of money-making plans are free. Send your name today for the free book giving all inside facts, then you can decide. Don't waste a minute as you might lose this opportunity through unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

ALBERT MILLS
6483 Monmouth Avenue Cincinnati, Ohio

NOT A CONTEST

Not a lottery. Not a game of chance. You don't have to "win" to get a Ford Car of your own. I give these Ford Cars to producers as a bonus over and above their cash profits, to encourage prompt service to their customers. The car becomes your personal property with no strings attached.

AND HERE IS POSITIVE PROOF OF BIG EARNING POSSIBILITIES

Can you make money with a Coffee Agency? Yes. Here's a way to make it FAST! If only three or four people had made money as fast as this, you might call it an accident. But many have done it! Here are only a few—if space permitted I could print scores of exceptional earning reports:

	Amount Earned In One Week
F. J. Mosher, Wyo.	$ 60.00
Wilbur W. Whitcomb, Ohio	146.00
Clare C. Wellman, N. J.	96.00
Mrs. A. Anderson, Conn.	75.00
A. Pardini, Calif.	69.09
Norman Geisler, Mich.	136.50
Gunson R. Wood, N. Y.	82.10
Lamar C. Cooper, Mich.	82.00
Helen V. Woolmington, Penna.	45.00
Ruby Hannen, W. Va.	73.00
Hans Coordes, Neb.	96.40
Lambert Wilson, Mich.	79.00
W. J. Way, Kans.	78.15

The above reports of exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name for FREE Facts.

Free Offer COUPON

MAIL COUPON NOW!

SEND NO MONEY — FREE

Albert Mills, President,
6483 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

Send your free book telling how to start a Local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or a single person) can make up to $60.00 in a week. I will read it and then let you know if I want to accept this opportunity.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

RED SEAL WESTERN

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Vol. 7 **DEC., 1938** No. 2

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This is an ACE MAGAZINE—See Page 8

I WILL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a

GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. Smith, President National Radio Institute Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a RADIO EXPERT. I will send you my first lesson FREE. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical knowledge become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to $8,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Why Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

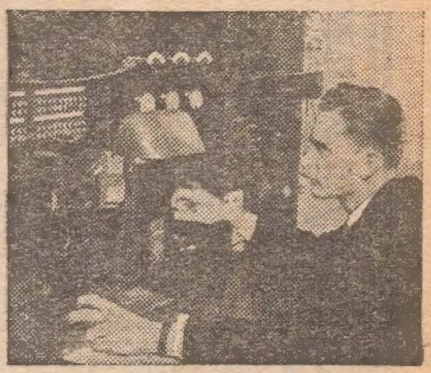
Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over $50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning.

How You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud-speaker installations. This 50-50 method of training—with printed instructions and working with Radio parts and circuits—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you with a professional instrument for full time jobs after graduation.



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I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for sample lesson and 64-page book. They're free to any fellow over 16 years old. They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my training in Radio and Television; show you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 8MA8, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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29x4.75-20	2.25	1.25
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30x5.00-20	2.60	1.25
5.25-17	2.65	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.65	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.65	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.65	1.35
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.35
5.50-17	3.00	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.00	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.00	1.45
6.00-16	3.50	1.45
6.00-17	3.15	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.15	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.15	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.15	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.40	1.55
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33x4½	3.20	1.45
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Name .....

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How to Get a Raise

Many men who were not able to finish school are held down all through life because they lack a good education in the correct use of the English language. Here is how to make it up in only 15 minutes a day.

THE chances are ten to one that you have just as much brains as the next man.

But you can't make the most of them, if bad mistakes in English clutter up your conversation—if you flounder around for words, pause, stammer, or just stay tongue-tied because you'd rather keep quiet than make a bad break!

SHERWIN CODY

It's plain truth that the way you talk determines at once what others think of you. That's all they have to go by. And to get ahead, you have to make them listen to what you say. You must make them think so well of you that they will want to help you, want to put in a good word for you.

Skill at your trade makes you a foreman or plant supt. much faster, when you have the advantage of effective English to help you.

But if your language is so poor that people size you up as being less capable, or worth less money, than you really are—where can you ever get? Or if little mistakes that you don't even realize you are making keep you from meeting the right sort of friends, the persons who can help you get ahead—that's a handicap you're sure to feel.

Schooling Makes No Difference

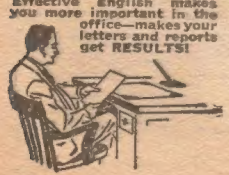
Perhaps you, like so many others, had to quit school before you could finish. That's no disgrace. But nothing is so likely to give you away now, at the very moment when you can least afford it, as the improper use of English. Yet you can never know the mistakes you may be making until you have some sure way of finding them!

Counter clerks get to be store or division managers sooner, when persuasive, selling English helps them win and hold customers!

Would you like to have an amazingly easy way to do just that?—a quick, simple way that has shown other men who never went to college—thousands who never graduated from high school—thousands more who never even finished grade school—how to speak so well that others say of them, "There goes a successful man!"

New Invention—SELF-Correcting

Do you work at a desk? Effective English makes you more important in the office—makes your letters and reports get RESULTS!



Over 100,000 other men and women have already taken advantage of such a method—a remarkably simple invention by Sherwin Cody—the man who sensibly realized that the average person doesn't want to fuss around with teachers; or dull "rules" to study; or tiresome lessons to write out.

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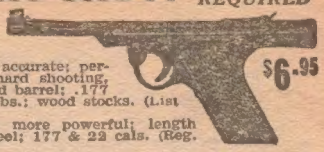

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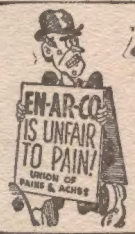

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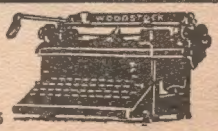

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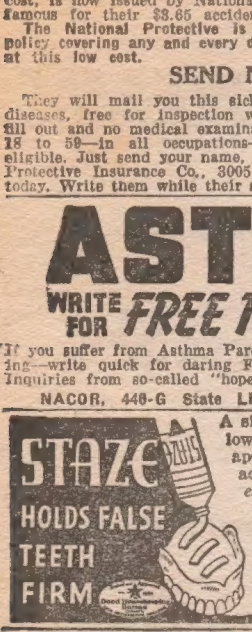

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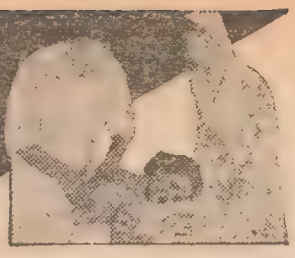

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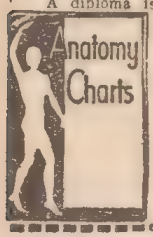

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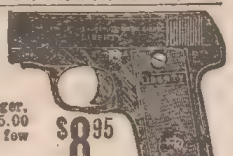

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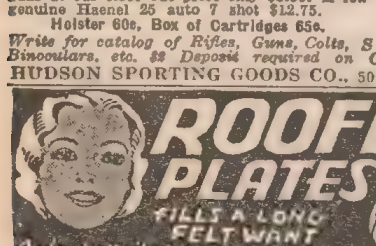

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The stock-whip snapped around the Colt.

From his chin-straps to his Argentine boots, he looked like a Gaucho. But Texas claimed him as a son. And when a range octopus reached out hungry tentacles to grasp his heritage, he mixed bolas with bullets to untangle the blood-woven web.

CHAPTER I

Lash for a Lobo

A DISREPUTABLE looking prospector clumped miserably out of a flop house and onto Calloway's main street. There he stopped and squinted against the blinding noonday sunlight while a warm breeze toyed with his tobacco-stained beard. Of a sudden the blood-shot eyes popped wide open. For a moment he stared, then muttering incoherently he whirled and hurried into the Green Owl Saloon.

"Fer the love o' Satan, Dutch," he

blurted hoarsely to the squat bartender, "gimme a slug o' liquid lightning, quick! My nerves are all busted from my long spree, and I'm seein' things. Things that *ain't*—that couldn't possibly be. I got to have a bracer!"

There was a bottle and a glass already on the bar. He ignored the glass, seized the bottle and drank deeply. When he got his breath back, he wiped his lips on a dirty shirt-sleeve, let out a gusty sigh of relief. The shaggy-haired old fellow clapped the bottle onto the bar, returned to the door and peeped furtively.

"Damned if it ain't still there!" he exclaimed. "Don't seem possible, but—either it's real, or I'm crazy."

The square-headed barkeep assured him cheerfully: "You are crazy anyhow—bud whad iss it you dink you see?"

A leathery ranchman near a window let out a yelp and bolted from his chair. "Holy hoptoads! Take a look down the street, men, and tell me if you see what I see!"

Chairs scraped. Boots shuffled and stamped as men hurried to get a look. Ejaculations told that every one of them did see the same thing which had so excited the bleary-eyed prospector and the leathery ranchman. Nor was the excitement confined to the Green Owl Saloon. People were stopping on the street and gazing in blank amazement. Others were crowding to windows, doorways, the sidewalk.

No wonder they were astonished. Coming along the street was a sight as surprising to that typical cowtown, as would have been a ship standing under full sail in the midst of the desert. It was a horseman, sitting a mahogany-brown mount. A strange rider such as the range people of that community never before had seen.

He was a well-built young fellow of medium size—but here the commonplaceness of him ended. His dress was astonishingly bizarre, to Calloway at least. A black, flat-topped hat rested jauntily on a side of his head. Its chinstraps fell half-way to his broad, silver-studded belt.

Beneath the hat and fitting closely about the hair was a silken kerchief. Its free ends played gently in the breeze as he moved casually along. He wore a bolero of filigreed buckskin; a blue silk shirt that bloused at wrists and waist; bright red pants of soft material which billowed around his wiry legs; shiny black boots, heeled with short spurs that flashed in the bright sunlight. It was no wonder that Calloway was petrified with surprise.

One man of the group in the doorway of the Green Owl Saloon mumbled: "Am I loco, too, or is there really a rider in such a git-up? What the hell?"

The bartender chuckled and explained: "He iss a Gaucho, a Soud Amerigan cowpoy—or ad least he iss dressed like one. I spend t'ree yerss in the gaddle goundry down there, and I haf seen many such vellows."

The astonishing stranger was moving his horse at a walk now. An abstracted feminine voice spoke above the quiet which gripped the street: "My! Isn't he handsome?"

A VAGUE frown of annoyance crossed the picturesque stranger's tanned brow. Evidently he disliked this being publicly and outspokenly admired. Or perhaps he con-

sidered it mockery. He turned gray eyes upon the speaker, eyes that were coolly casual. But they lighted with surprised interest when he saw who it was had spoken.

Seated in a buckboard and looking backward were a girl and a fat elderly woman. The girl was dark-haired, blue-eyed, decidedly pretty. Impulsively the horseman stopped, and lifted a hand to his hat. His lips parted and white teeth flashed in a smile.

The girl showed now that her words had escaped her unconsciously. Her smooth face flushed a deep red. The soft lips tightened and the blue eyes flashed. She tossed her head and flounced around so as to look at her team. Slapping the horses with the lines, she wheeled them away from the hitchrail and went driving spiritedly down the street. All this as if the stranger, and not she, were to blame for what had happened.

He chuckled silently, turned his mount toward the Green Owl Saloon. The smile fled from his lean face when his eyes caught those of a sleek, dark man who stood at the edge of the sidewalk. The black eyes in the handsome face were burning hot, and the mouth had a grim set. "Jealous," the rider said softly to himself. "Evidently he's stuck on the girl—and himself."

The moment of stunned surprise was gone. People began to move, and talk. Some of those in front of the Green Owl Saloon became insultingly outspoken. A bullet-headed, puffy-eyed fellow grinned sneeringly and said in a growling voice: "I wonder where at is the circus."

The tall man with the smoldering eyes snapped: "There certainly must be one somewhere near." And his stare became contemptuously meaning.

The rider gave them each a glance of cool indifference. Ignoring everyone, he dismounted and tossed his reins over a hitchrail. Then he headed casually for the saloon doorway.

"He don't savvy English," some one observed. "An Argintine spik, I reckon."

The Gaucho's form was lazily catlike, and possessed of that slight shoulder slouch characteristic of range riders. The scarlet pants ballooned in the breeze, and the bright spurs tinkled beneath the sunlight as he strode with easy grace into the saloon. In his brown right hand he carried a tightly coiled South American stock-whip which he had removed from his saddle before dismounting.

Curious men crowded after him, heckled him anew. He appeared coolly oblivious to the presence of everyone save the bartender, from whom he had ordered a glass of beer. He began tasting it calmly, puffing at a cigarette and gazing idly forward, between sips.

Convinced that he understood little if any English, a few men became insulting in their remarks. "By hell, lookit them loud britches!" chuckled the heavy-set ruffian with the bullet head and the puffy-lidded eyes.

"You said 'er, Tug Gossett," echoed a rat-faced man. "Jest like a pair of old maid's bloomers I seen oncet in a comedy show."

The crowd guffawed. Still the stranger ignored those rough men. Had they been studying the clearly hewn face closely, however, they could have seen a change registering there. The eyes were becoming leaden; the lips were compressed. The man had taken about all he could stand.

The bulky heckler—Tug Gossett, his pal had called him—was emboldened by the Gaucho's quiescence, encouraged by the laughter of the crowd. He went to the newcomer's side, took hold of a leg of the balloon pants and spread it out.

"Say, spik," he said, "where'd you git 'em? Out of your gramma's hope-chest?"

There was another burst of raucous laughter, but it ceased abruptly. The picturesque stranger's lazy manner was gone in a flash. He wheeled and seized Tug Gossett by the neckerchief, swept him away from the bar. His right hand rose and fell so quick-

ly that to the pop-eyed and breathless spectators it was but a brown blur. The loaded handle of the whip cracked against the ruffian's head. The thick legs promptly buckled and the burly heckler went down with a jarring thud. He lay twisted limply on the floor, out cold.

FOR just a few seconds there was shocked astonishment, then the slim man with the face of a rodent was snarling an oath and diving for his gun. He had not moved up as had his pal, but stood down the bar and well away from the man in the Gaucho attire. In a wave the other men fled from the bar, leaving the Gaucho and the wiry man facing each other.

The colorful stranger had not made a play for his own gun. Instead, his right arm jerked. With blinding rapidity the stock-whip went uncoiling, straightening, reaching. Its cracker snapped about the Colt as the six-shooter was rising. A sharp jerk, and the gun quit its owner's hand. The next second it was free of the lash and flying end over end through the air. The whip whistled, lashed out, and the tip of Rat-face's Stetson crown was cut away. The fellow gave a yell of dismay and cowered against the bar.

The Gaucho moved alertly away from the bar, and now he spoke for the first time. In cold, sharp English that held no trace of foreign accent he warned: "I could have blinded you just as easy, Squirrel-mouth. Look at this."

He whirled on boot heels, swept the whip in a backhand blow. The rawhide lash whistled again. The glass which he had left on the bar seemed to explode. Amber fluid gushed out onto the counter and shiny fragments sleeted around.

With a flick of the wrist the man stretched the snakelike whip full length upon the floor. Another flick, and the lively thing came racing toward him, coiling to his right hand. The next moment he was holding it nonchalantly, returning to the bar.

"Another beer," he told the Dutchman.

Tug Gossett stirred, groaned. His rat-faced pal and a second man pulled him to his feet. They assisted him—legs rickety, head rolling—out of the barroom.

The hecklers had called the stranger spik, and chollo. Now he stripped the silver button of his chin-strap downward, pushed back his flat-crowned hat and let it rest between his shoulders. Next he pulled away the silken kerchief skullcap. There were mumbles of surprise, for the hair was tawny. Certainly here was no native South American.

Perfectly calm again, the man explained: "Yeh, folks, I'm strictly United States. Joe Key is the name—plain cowhand, originally from Texas. A few years ago I tied in as a kid roustabout with a big outfit that was shipping to the Argentine. Just recent I headed back. Left sort of sudden, with only my pampas things. Come over by stock-boat to the Gulf of Lower California, and transferred there to one of the paddle wheelers plying the Colorado River. Finally got off at Needles Landing, fifty miles from here.

"Up until then I'd had no chance to buy the things I'd need in this country. I picked up a pretty good pony, but decided to wait until I got to Calloway before buying the regulation range duds common to these parts. So that's the way it is, gents. I'm just a wandering maverick returned to the homeland to graze. I ain't looking to lock horns with anybody. I can stand for any amount of hoorawing so long as it comes in the right spirit. But I don't aim to tolerate any deliberate insults—not without a fight, leastwise."

He tossed off his beer, clapped the glass onto the bar, turned and strode out of the place. At a big general store he completely outfitted himself. After he had finished, an old cowpuncher with a walrus mustache, and wearing oversized clothes, approached him and confided: "Zonie Miller wants to see you, feller."

"Yeah? Who's Zonie Miller?"

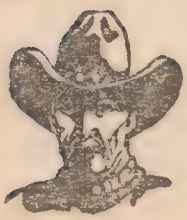
"The gal you smiled at on the street when fust you rode up. Foller me at a little distance. I'll lead you to her."

Without giving Joe Key a chance to ask questions he turned and hurried away. The Gaucho went to the sidewalk and gazed at him curiously. The little puncher was a comical sight. The battered Stetson rested against his ears, pushing them downward. The ends of the great mustache could be seen blowing beside each leathery cheek. A faded bandanna completely enveloped the neck. The open vest fitted him like a short-coat over the checkered shirt that seemed almost big enough for two fellows such as he. The worn boot heels rapped sharply on the flagstoned walkway as the bowed legs strode rapidly along.

Joe Key would have chuckled but for the seriousness of the occasion. What adventure was this? The mysterious little old man had said that the girl had sent for him, had asked him to follow secretively. Why? Key was anything but a fool. He realized that the diminutive cowpuncher might be leading him into a trap, designed by the two men who had been chastised in the Green Owl Saloon. The prospect of meeting the girl caused the Gaucho to accept the risk, however. Eyes keenly alert, right hand ready to speed for his six-shooter, Key stepped out in a leisurely walk.

CHAPTER II

Feudal Fires



THE loop-legged old puncher turned a corner. He had glanced along the main street to see if Joe Key was coming on, just before he had disappeared. When Key arrived at that same corner he found the guide waiting for him.

The old waddy said confidentially: "This here is the Dreamy Lane Hotel. It has a sort of private parlor upstairs. The gal and her chappyroon are waitin' there. We'll enter the buildin' by this here outside stairway."

"What is it she wants to see me about?" Key inquired, as he followed the little man to the flight of steps. "And why all the secrecy?"

"Zonie Miller will do all the talkin'," the puncher mumbled.

Then his old boot soles began patting swiftly up the steps. Joe Key overtook him just as he faced a hall doorway and lifted a fist to knock.

"Wait!" the Gaucho whispered sharply. His dark gray eyes drilled into the blue ones of the other man, and he warned: "If this turns out to be a trap, I'm going to uncouple you with a bullet." He patted the butt of a six-shooter.

The old waddy replied impatiently: "Now why in the world would I want to lead you into a trap? Cowboy, don't be so daggoned boogery."

He rapped upon the door then and announced: "It's us, Zonie."

A voice bade them enter. Joe Key's heart stirred with mild excitement, for he had recognized the voice as that of the pretty girl whom he had seen in the buckboard.

Key followed his guide into the room. The slender girl and the stout, elderly woman were standing. Key had removed his flat-topped hat and now he bowed. The girl looked curiously at his hair—so blond in contrast to the deep sun-tan of his face—into his gray eyes and murmured involuntarily: "You're not a South American."

He smiled. "No, ma'am. Did you want me to be?"

He saw her chill a little, while the big woman stiffened slightly.

The girl answered aloofly: "It makes no difference to me. I'm just surprised, that's all. The get-up is that of a Gaucho."

He explained, then. She nodded gravely and said: "I'm Arizona Mil-

ler. The boys call me just Zona, or Zonie. This lady is Martha Higgins, my friend and companion. She teaches the Calloway public school during the season." She motioned toward the little old cowpuncher: "That's Banty Dowd, one of the three boys who work for me.

"Yes, you see, my father died two years ago and left me the small Weathervane ranch. And that brings up the topic I want to discuss with you. I'm being run over by neighboring ranchmen, and I'm hiring help. I heard about how you took care of those two coyotes in the Green Owl. I can use a cowpoke like you. I thought it best to hold this conversation secretly—until we'd decided on something."

Joe Key studied her curiously. "Range trouble, eh? And you want to hire my gun. That's sort of a new twist—a girl hiring pistoleers in a range feud."

She flushed, declared sharply: "Merely in self-defense. Would you like to work for me, Joe Key?"

He grinned, twirled the flat-crowned hat. "Yessum, I sure would—but I can't."

Her slender brows lifted. The big woman stiffened belligerently. Banty Dowd shifted uneasily.

"You—you ain't hired out to the opposition?" he queried.

"I ain't hired out to nobody. And I don't know who is the opposition."

"Then why can't you work for the Weathervane?" snapped Martha Higgins.

"Because, ma'am, I've got a spread of my own to look after."

"You own a ranch?" Zona Miller inquired in surprise. "Where? Which one?"

"You knew Alfred E. Scott, I reckon. Well, he was my half-brother. He died a while back, as you know. I inherited all that he owned—which was a half-interest in the Flying V spread. My partner is a fella named Corcey, I understand. I haven't met—"

He paused in surprise. Arizona Miller's face suddenly had become marble-like and her blue eyes were shooting sparks of fire.

"No wonder you grinned when I offered to hire you! Alfred E. Scott's half-brother! Coaley Corcey's partner! Half-owner of the Cinco spread! Why—why—you. Come on, Martha and Banty, let's get out of here!"

THEY swept from the room. The door banged. Angry footsteps stamped away down the hall. For a moment Joe Key was too shocked with surprise to move or speak. He just stood there in the room, staring at the door. Then he burst into a short laugh and told himself: "Well I'll be doggoned! Looks like I set my boots into something."

Thoughtfully, slowly, he left the hotel by the same way that he had entered it. When he got onto the sidewalk, his companions of a moment before were nowhere within sight. He set out to find them, to ask for a showdown. But a minute later he saw them leaving town in a small cloud of dust.

Joe Key went to a barber shop and bought a bath. While there he shucked the Gaucho outfit and got into his newly purchased range attire. He was heading up the street a moment later, when a growling voice froze him: "All right, Gaucho, turn around and take it in front." Key flung a glance over one shoulder. Tug Gossett was standing at a corner of a building. The tree-trunk legs were braced wide apart, the bullet head was thrust forward, and the hairy right hand rested on the butt of a six-shooter.

Joe Key started to turn. Tug Gossett did not give him time to face about and meet the issue squarely. Key was only half around when Gossett jerked his gun from its holster. Catlike, Key sprang, and his right hand flew to his own Colt.

Despite the handicap in the draw, the report of his gun blended with that of the revenge-bent man. Key's pantherish bound caused Gossett to

miss. The cowboy felt the slug burn through the back of his shirt. While still in stride he fired a shot across his hard belly.

Tug Gossett rocked back on his heels as he shot a second time, and his bullet flew wide of the human mark. Joe Key had fired again, too. The four reports had come as a single prolonged roar. Gossett's right arm swung to his side. The pistol left the blunt fingers and hit the dirt. He staggered about drunkenly, then stumbled over to a porch edge and sat down. Hunched miserably there, he cursed Joe Key.

"I'll git you yet," he swore. "Nobody's goin' to bounce me around and git away with it."

"Your misfortunes are of your own making," Key told him g r i m l y. "You'd better leave me alone, hombre, or you're apt to have still worse luck the next time."

An excited crowd was gathering. The inevitable lawman appeared and demanded to know the why and the wherefore of the gunfight. Joe Key was spared the necessity of explaining.

"I seen the whole thing!" an aged loafer spoke up. "I was acrost the street and seen Tug Gossett lay fer the Gaucho!" He then proceeded to give true details of the fight. Other men who had witnessed the gun battle corroborated his story.

At this juncture Tug Gossett passed out from bullet shock and blood loss. The officer took a quick look at the two wounds, then snapped: "Get him over to the doc's office, pronto!" During the excitement Joe Key quietly walked away.

He had obtained directions to the Flying V ranch, and was ready to hit the trail for his future home, when he was mildly startled by the sudden approach of two strangers. Both were tall, inscrutable, pretentious looking.

The foremost one spoke: "Howdy, I'm Martin Hume, owner of the M H Bar outfit."

He said it as though it meant much, but Joe Key merely nodded. He never had heard of either Martin Hume or the M H Bar before. The ranchman wore a huge gray hat, a store suit, a woolen shirt with a black flowing tie, highly polished boots. He did not have the appearance of a man born to the range. His companion did. Here was a long-limbed fellow, cold of eye, lean and brown of visage. His chaps and his boots were old and scarred. He wore two guns, and they were strapped low against the sinewy thighs.

"This is Lake Kincannon, my foreman," introduced Hume, and again Joe Key merely nodded. He was keenly watchful, wondering why the two strangers had accosted him. Kincannon nodded silently, too, and stared inscrutably.

The big ranchman then blurted: "Cowboy, Tug Gossett is one of my riders."

Through Key's mind flew the thought that these two men had come to take up the quarrel. He eased away from his horse, drew up his hands and rested them lightly on his hip-bones.

"So-o?" he prompted slowly.

He and the tall cattleman stared into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER III

Mystery Ranch

MARTIN HUME had pale blue eyes that g a z e d b o l d l y from between narrowed lids. His features strong boned with a heavy nose that lifted slightly along its ridge—the visage of an indomitable fighting man.

He stated in an emotionless voice: "First you split Tug Gossett's scalp with a loaded whip handle. Later you shoot him twice."

Joe Key disdained to explain that the fault for the trouble rested with Gossett. Surely Martin Hume must be aware of such fact already. All he said was to repeat that defiant "So-o?"

Hume smiled then and told him:

"So now I'm short a man—since Tug won't be able to ride range for a while. I'd like to hire you to take his place. I have the biggest ranch in the country, pay the highest wages, put out the best grub. I heard all about that affair in the Green Owl, and it just happens that I witnessed the gunfight between you and Gossett. Man, you're a tiger in battle! Fast mentally and physically. I can use a cowpoke like you."

Key let out a short laugh. "That makes twice I've heard them words within the last hour. Arizona Miller spoke 'em, too."

Martin Hume's strong jaws stiffened. Lake Kincannon's cold eyes jerked wider open. "Mean—you hired yourself out to her?"

"Nope, told her I couldn't work for the Weathervane."

Martin Hume smiled again: "Smart cowboy! Then you're free to accept my offer. What about it?"

"Answer's the same as I gave her—no. I've got fish of my own to fry." He then told of his inheriting a half-interest in the Flying V ranch.

A light of amusement kept dawning on Martin Hume's face as he listened. He burst into a short laugh then, and said: *"Bueno!* You'll be working for me anyway."

Joe Key blinked in surprise. He glanced at Lake Kincannon. The frost in the man's eyes was shimmering.

The bewildered Key inquired of Hume: "What do you mean?"

The big ranchman continued to regard him amusedly through thinned eyes. He said enigmatically: "You'll find out." Then he and his foreman turned and walked away. They looked back just once, before disappearing into the Green Owl Saloon. Puzzled, Joe Key could see that they were laughing at him.

Joe Key's mind was overshadowed with an elusive species of anxiety as he swung into the saddle and headed out of town. He was haunted by a premonition that he was surrounded by unseen trouble—trouble which he could not avoid, or succeed against except through hard fighting.

It was a somewhat desolate country through which he traveled, once he was well away from the town. The rolling Colorado was fifty miles to westward. Against the north and the east stood mountain ranges—side riven, spike ridged, barren and forbidding. Lonely mesas and dead lava flows were on every hand. The terrain was streaked with cut-washes and black arroyos. Harsh growth dotted the plains. Joe Key knew that this whole country was largely desert. That the scattered ranches and town depended on waterholes and spring-fed creeks for existence.

THE day was waning when Joe Key came within sight of the Fying V ranch—commonly called the Cinco spread. It was situated within a rocky little valley, and was partly shaded by a few giant cottonwood trees. A streak of willows along a winding little gulch told of the presence of a tiny stream.

"A right likely little ranch," Key observed.

As he approached the horse corral he heard a rumbling of hoofs, saw a cloud of dust, and caught glimpses of galloping animals. Filled with curiosity, he quickened pace. Suddenly then there broke out a wild cursing, and he heard the cracking of a whip.

"What the Sam Hill's coming off here?" he muttered.

When he reached the pole fence he witnessed something which caused anger to go roaring through him. A man on foot held a coiled lariat in one hand, a blacksnake in the other. As the fellow moved along, cursing, he was keeping a wild-eyed roan horse between him and the circular fence. Now and then the whip lashed out, dealing terrible punishment, causing the poor equine victim to squeal and quiver in pain. Already the sleek coat was flecked with blood. Joe Key saw white flame. This was a Flying V horse, but it would have made no dif-

ference had the animal worn any other brand.

Key could have stopped the cruelty by simply shouting at the perpetrator. But in his anger the cowboy wanted to give the fellow a taste of the same punishment that was being dealt the roan horse. The coiled South American stock-whip was tied at the saddle bow. Key released it by jerking a slip knot. With the agility of a cat he sprang onto the pole fence. His right arm flew backward. The long whip uncurled. The arm went forward. The rawhide thong whistled through the air.

There was a sound like the bursting of a firecracker. Dust flew from the seat of the wiry man's Levis. He abruptly dropped the blacksnake, screamed in mingled surprise and agony, slapped hands to his seats and jumped straight up into the air. The faded denim cloth had been cut as if with a knife.

The long, writhing serpent of leather did not pause. Now it was circling over the wielder's head, lashing out again. But this time the blow "softened." With lightning swiftness the rawhide thong wrapped itself about the other fellow's neck. Key jerked, upsetting the man. Then, bracing himself on the fence, Key began dragging his victim, taking in the whip hand over hand.

The man sputtered, squawked, clawed at the constricting coils with one hand, at his six-shooter with the other. His Stetson was tilted down over his face so that he and Joe could not see each other's features. The cayuses had ceased to charge around the corral. Now they were staring wall-eyed, stomping, tossing their heads and neighing. It seemed that they were laughing at the ludicrous spectacle.

The man on the ground scrambled erect. The rawhide coils suddenly had fallen away. His left hand had swept the Stetson brim upward and he was facing Joe Key, a drawn six-gun in his right fist.

Key stiffened. Here was the rat-faced man whom he had disarmed in the Green Owl Saloon. The fellow, too, was shocked with surprise. For an instant he just stared foolishly. Then a fiendish grin wrinkled his thin features.

The narrowed eyes held a poisonous gleam as he said softly. "Well, if it ain't the Gaucho!" His face twisted then and he snarled: "If you move that whup I'll kill you. Drop 'er and gid down frum there. Light on the ground with your hands up. I'm goin' to take your cutter, then blacksnake the livin' hell outa you. Come on, light!"

JOE KEY got down into the corral, but he did not raise his hands. Instead, with his cold eyes fixed upon the other man he started straight toward the fellow and ground out: "Put up that hogleg before I take it away from you and shove it down your throat. Then you get the hell off this ranch."

The man blinked in surprise, then again his face contorted. "W'y, you —I'll blast you to git even for what you done to me, and to my pal, Tug Gossett!"

In that instant of blind-rattler rage it seemed that he was determined upon cold-bloded murder. Joe Key stopped, chilled. Through his mind flew the thought that he had better dive aside and send a hand flying for his own Colt.

He tensed for the action, and then a metallic voice interrupted: "Stow that cutter, Goph—this ain't a murder farm. I can handle the gent."

Joe Key shot a glance aside, and received a fresh shock of surprise. Standing just inside the corral gate was the same tall, dark stranger who had sneered at him in town.

Goph put the gun away. The dark man came slowly forward, the keen eyes holding Joe Key.

"You keep your bill out of it, hombre, or I'll kick you off the ranch, too," Key snapped.

In his smoldering rage he was not thinking clearly. The sleek, dark man was in faded range attire, so Key guessed him to be just another hired hand, perhaps the foreman. But the fellow's air of authority should have told him differently.

The man's lips quirked in an acrid smile: "It happens that I'm the owner of this spread, smart alec. Coaley Corcey is the name. I suppose you're looking for a job. Well, you don't get it here. Now *you* get off the ranch before I kick you off."

Joe Key's anger vanished and he was filled only with curiosity. He studied the slim, dark man anew. Slowly he corrected: "You mean you're half-owner of the spread. The other half belongs to me. I'm Joe Key, half-brother of the late Alfred E. Scott."

Both Corcey and the rodent-faced Goph stared. Key fancied that he saw uneasiness in their eyes.

"What proof have you got?" Corcey blurted. Key silently produced some papers and handed them to him. He scanned them hurriedly, then nodded. "Come up to the ranch house and we'll habla."

Joe Key's gaze wheeled back to the man he had beaten up. "Not until I've finished firing this rat. Get your outfit and your pay, if any—and drift, hombre."

"Now wait a minute, Key," snapped Coaley Corcey. "You don't know the circumstances. That roan horse is a devil. He has learned to dodge the lasso until it's well-nigh impossible to rope him, and lately he has taken to fighting. He had a lesson coming to him. I've been so mad at him myself that I could've killed him."

"If he's smart and quick enough to keep from being snagged by an expert roper, he ought to make a good cutting-horse — with proper handling. Anyway, no animal deserves to be slashed up like that. Furthermore, this hombre has twice pulled a sneak-draw on me. Get going, rat."

"Gopher Naith is a good hand!" barked Corcey, black eyes snapping. "He stays!"

"I say he don't."

"And I say he does!"

Key stated grimly: "The only way he'll be able to stay on this ranch is by outshooting me in a gunfight." He squared himself, laid his right hand on his six-shooter and clipped at Gopher Naith: "How about it, hombre? Do you consider yourself fired, or shall we shoot it out?"

Gopher Naith's killer rage was gone now, and perhaps he was remembering the gray-eyed Gaucho's almost magical quickness. He hesitated, shifted the sneaky eyes between Key and Corcey.

"I'll go," he mumbled sullenly. "I don't hanker to stay on no ranch where you're at."

They left him there and went up to the main dwelling. As they passed the bunkhouse Corcey called an order for a man who was applying whitewash to the structure, to take care of Key's mount, and bring up the warbag. Apparently Corcey had quickly forgotten the trouble at the corral.

IN the front room Coaley Corcey set out a bottle and two glasses, then went over Joe Key's papers carefully. Key once more explained his riding into Calloway dressed as a South American Gaucho.

"When Al Scott passed on sudden-like," he told Corcey, "people here didn't know a thing about his folks, so the law contacted the place he'd come from. It happened that I was the only heir, and the legal authority down in the old stomping ground notified me. The difference in name, and the fact that you folks didn't know the heir was to come from the Argentine, kept any of you from guessing that I was here to take over Al Scott's ranching interests."

Coaley Corcey's manner changed completely. He became suave, smiling, genial. Young Joe Key closely

studied this man who was henceforth to be his ranching partner. Corcey was a handsome man. There was a fascinating indolence of movement about him. The black hair was as sleek as a crow's wing. The jetty eyes snapped with lively fires. Key looked at the almost girlish hands, and felt a certainty that they could be fast with guns.

Corcey rattled off some business details. The Cinco regularly employed three punchers; twice that number at roundup times. There were about two hundred head of cattle—just a small outfit. He described the range boundaries.

"Only two hundred head of critters?" Key inquired. "We won't need any hired hands from now on—except at roundup times. Me and you can handle the spread alone."

Corcey shrugged. "Just as you say, partner," he agreed. "But there has been a little range trouble. "That's why your half-brother and I have kept a few dependable gunnies out here."

"Range trouble? Tell me about it."

Corcey frowned, hesitated. Shrewd Joe Key guessed that the man was swiftly and carefully marshaling the details of his story.

"Well, in the first place," Corcey began slowly, "there's a sort of feud between us and the Weathervane outfit. We suspect them of stealing our calves and they accuse us of rustling theirs. Each outfit insists that the other is secretly in cahoots with Martin Hume, of the M H Bar. Biggest rancher in these parts. Ambitious to take over all the smaller spreads. The man is shrewed, a power, and rough-shod in his methods."

Key then told of his meeting with Hume and the cattleman's foreman, Lake Kincannon—of the offer of employment. He mentioned their strange behavior and Hume's puzzling words: "You'll be working for me anyway."

Key asked curiously: "What did he mean?"

"I can't imagine—unless he figures that our feud with the Weathervane will help him to get that ranch."

"Well, he can figure different. There ain't going to be any feud with the Weathervane from now on. I'm going to ride over there soon and smooth out the whole trouble."

Again he saw fires of resentment burn deep within Coaley Corcey's black eyes, and he wondered. What mystery was this? If there was trouble between the two ranches, why this latent show of jealousy?

Corcey mumbled: "You'd be ramming your head into a hornets' nest. I'd advise you to stay away from over there." Joe Key changed the subject.

The next morning he announced his intention of going to the county seat. He wanted to transact the legal business incident to the taking over of his interest in the Cinco spread. Corcey had laid off the other two hands, following out Key's suggestion that no hired help would be necessary except during roundups. The suave ranchman's apparent eagerness to co-operate left Key suspicious. Behind Corcey's ingratiating smiles, deep within the sharp black eyes, was a subtle light which left his new partner puzzled and vaguely worried. Corcey had said not another word about Gopher.

Joe Key was thoughtful as he rode away from the Cinco. Well out from the ranch house he suddenly decided to go to the Weathervane that very morning, so he changed his direction of travel.

The Weathervane was so called because the brand consisted of a big M hung on an arrow. It was a small outfit, but as neat as a pin. Joe Key found Arizona Miller and Bandy Dowd at the blacksmith shed. The little old puncher was doing some work there, and the girl apparently was overseeing the job. They gaped in surprise as he rode up. Then Banty dropped his work. The girl's eyes blazed, and Joe Key knew that he was in for trouble.

CHAPTER IV

Dark-Eyed Spitfire

Arizona Miller was dressed in saddle costume, except that she wore no hat. A cloud of dark hair crinkled about the shapely head. She took a threatening stance and observed sarcastically: "Well! I hardly knew you without the monkey suit."

He could not resist saying in malicious repartee: "Then I reckon you're disappointed. I heard you say you liked me in the Gaucho duds."

Banty covered a grin with a gnarled hand, but the girl was furious. A rich flush swelled up from her soft throat and suffused her cheeks. The eyes were pools of blue fire. Embarrassment and offended pride mingled with her burning anger.

"Why—why, you despicable intruder!" she stormed. "How dare you insult me? Get off this ranch before I have you quirted!"

"Now, now, ma'am—take it easy. I come here to make a plea for peace. I've heard there's a mild feud on between the Cinco and the Weathervane, and I'd like to see the trouble ironed out." Key made his plea for peace then, pointing out that he could not be held to blame for anything that had happened in the past. He earnestly stated his desire for good fellowship between the two spreads. "From what I hear of Martin Hume, the small ranchers had better all join hands and stand together."

She was too offended to bury the hatchet so quickly. "I wouldn't trust a Cinco man, especially the half-brother of Alfred E. Scott," she declared hotly. "Now get off this ranch!"

"But, ma'am—"

"I said ride!" She stamped a little boot.

Banty Dowd flourished a big pistol and blustered: "Yeah, git goin' or I'll puncturate your danged hide! Git!" But he winked at Joe Key, and jerked his head understandingly.

Joe Key interpreted the signs to mean that Banty was friendly, that the little man would see him later and talk over the whole situation.

"All right, ma'am, here I go," Key told the girl pleasantly. "But please think over what I've said. I want us to be friends — very good friends. Feudin' is always kind of silly."

He touched his hat again, then reined about and went saddling leisurely away. Once he looked back and saw the girl regarding him curiously. All the fire was gone from her now. He smiled, then began to whistle a gay tune.

Well away from the ranch Joe Key rode slowly. For he had an idea that Banty Dowd would follow him—and he was right. He saw a rider coming dodging along through the scrub, and immediately recognized the diminutive puncher.

Banty grinned as he came up. He explained: "I told 'er I was goin' to shadder you to see if you was up to any mischief. She said she felt plumb certain you was all right, and that I wasn't to pick on you. Now can you beat that? Wimmin are funny, huh?"

"They sure are, old-timer."

The two men dismounted, squatted on their heels, rolled cigarettes. And now Joe Key was given a clear picture of the entire situation in that country.

The powerful M H Bar spread was a range octopus which was slowly reaching out its tentacles to seize the whole district.

"Zonie was left a orphan two years ago when her paw died of rattlesnake bite," Banty explained. "Now it happens that Martin Hume wants both the leetle gal and her ranch. He failed to git either by coaxin', so he's tryin' roughshod methods, tryin' to force Zonie right into his arms."

"What do you mean, roughshod methods?"

"Well, here's the situation. This whole deestrict is shut off to the north by the sun-blasted mountains known as the Death Range. To west'ard is the Colorader, dangerous for herds. And even if they should cross, it would be a long way over sun-parched plains to a shipping point. All the range to south'ard and to east'ard is controlled by Martin Hume. He has armed guards at every spring. Nobody can water stock at any of them places without his say-so. There you have the pitcher.

"No one can move stock out of this deestrict unless Hume wills it. He has got the ranchers in his clutches, as the feller says, and he's squeezin'. He's in a position to make every dad-blamed one of 'em surrender to him sooner or later. The feller is shore to realize his ambition of ownin' the whole country—unless somebody kills 'im, and this ain't a-tall likely. He has behind him just about the toughest gun crew ever rounded up by any rancher in this here state."

Joe Key frowned. "Um-m, looks heap bad. And the trouble between you folks and the Cinco outfit? I'd like to hear your version of it."

THE leathery-faced little man fingered his great mustache and said slowly: "Well, it ain't unlike the trouble with the M H Bar. Coaley Corcey oncet had quite a case on Zonie Miller. But she spurned him, as the feller says, and he went bitter. We've an idee he's secretly in cahoots with Martin Hume, his scheme bein' to make the gal realize she needs him. I think now he wants her, just to show folks he can git her, one way or another.

"Likely he plans to see both spreads closed out to the M H Bar, then to double-cross Martin Hume and grab the gal right out of the big rancher's arms. But Zonie she has heap different plans. She don't aim to surrender to nobody. That fiery tike is preparin' to fight like hell."

Yes, Joe Key had a pretty clear picture of the whole situation now. He understood the burning resentment he had seen in Corcey's dark eyes. He understood Zona Miller's sharp rebuffs. Joe Key admitted to himself that Alfred E. Scott had been an avaricious man, and one who could have been easily handled by a suave schemer like Coaley Corcey.

Banty Dowd promised to try to draw Zona Miller into a peace treaty with Joe Key. The two men then parted company.

The attorney with whom Key talked in the county seat, corroborated all that Banty had said. The lawyer told Joe Key: "Martin Hume is a dangerous man to buck. He's brainy, powerful, rock-hard — literally smashes through to his objectives. I'd hate to try to stop him in anything. He used to be a politician down on the Rio Grande, but saw a chance to clean up big in this country and grabbed it. Don't make the mistake of thinking he's any the less tough, from not being range-bred. It took a gent with brains, and a fast gun to run politics as he did, in a rip-snorting town such as he came from."

His legal business consummated, Joe Key hit the trail for home. He decided to go by way of the Weathervane ranch, and again try to talk peace with Arizona Miller. Perhaps by this time Banty Dowd had "fixed" things.

Key was within a mile of the Weathervane, when he saw the girl riding alone. Instantly he rode to cut her path. She disappeared into a narrow valley. He galloped on.

Suddenly then the girl broke into the open, pursuing a calf and swinging a lariat. He smiled in admiration as he watched her tear along, dark hair flying. "By golly, she sure can ride!" he told himself.

The loop quit her hand, sailed through the air and snared the fleeing calf. The pony stiff-legged to a stop. The slim rider hit the ground and went quickly along the taut rope. The

calf was lolling its tongue, bucking, trying to bawl. The noose choked off the sounds. The ranch girl took hold of her catch and executed a quick throw. Within a trice she had the calf neatly hogtied. Now she removed the loop from the neck.

There was fresh outburst of action on the calf's part. The little animal floundered wildly and let out a frantic bawl. Joe Key wondered as to Zona Miller's purpose. Through his mind went remembrance of Coaley Corcey's words: "We suspect them of stealing our calves."

Consternation seized him as he galloped along. It almost wrenched a yell from his lips. An infuriated cow had broken cover and was charging the kneeling girl. Zona seemed not particularly alarmed as she got up and ran for her mount. Frightened by the girl's rush, and that of the insanely bellowing cow, the pony wheeled away. It soon stopped but at a point beyond the maddened brute's line of charge. Zona was plenty scared now.

Realizing that she could not hope to catch her pony before the bovine fury would come thundering down upon her, Zona Miller wheeled and made for the nearest object of shelter —a lone mesquite. But with a sickening sense of horror Joe Key realized that she would never reach it before the wild-eyed beast would be at her heels.

LOOSE earth had muffled the sounds of the rider's approach. Joe Key let out a wild yell, hoping to fluster the cow, to divert its mad charge, but the wall-eyed brute paid not the slightest heed. The white-faced girl gave the rocketing horseman a sideward glance and kept sprinting. He told himself that he never before had seen human eyes quite so large.

Joe Key's South American bolas was tied at his saddle bow. A jerk on a slip-knot released the thing into his right hand. In this instant of terrible emergency when a second was precious, he had reasoned in a flash that he could cast the bolas in half the time that would be required to make ready his lasso and throw a loop. But he must not miss! The girl's life might depend on the result of his cast.

Joe Key had become very proficient in the use of a bolas, down in the Argentine. He fervently hoped that he had lost none of the skill. As the lines with their ball-weighted ends whirled around and around above his head the waddy fleetingly remembered an old picture in one of his childhood schoolbooks—of a Gaucho catching an ostrich with one of those things.

His spurs bit once more. The already flying pony snorted and strained harder. The rider's body slanted forward. The lean face was grimly set and the dark gray eyes stared anxiously. He already was in throwing distance of the thundering target, but he wanted to make sure of the catch.

Arizona Miller gave him another sideward glance, an imploring one this time. The raging cow bellowed anew, lowered the terrible horns for the final drive. And then the whirling bolas quit the waddy's right hand. Crazily it windmilled through the air. Like an octopus gone wild it swiftly wound itself about the cow's forelegs. The surprised animal did a complete somersault and then lay floundering impotently.

Joe Key leaned down and swept Zona Miller into the saddle with him, galloped with her to her mount. "That was a pretty close call," he told her. as he helped her aboard her pony.

"It certainly was. I'd just finished inspecting the calf to see if its brand had been burned too deeply, when the mother brute came at me. How can I ever thank you enough?"

He grinned. "By smokin' the peace pipe with me. Wait'll I release the two critters and we'll talk it over."

He rode with her to the Weathervane ranch, and he was never to forget that short ride. It brought them into a warm mutual understanding, the beginning of something deeper

than a mere casual friendship. When he said good-by to her at twilight, he left with her a promise that he would help her find a way to defeat the inexorable purpose of Martin Hume.

Sleek Coaley Corcey was more suave and smiling than ever to him when he reached home that night.

"Well, how'd you come out?" the ranchman inquired pleasantly. "Get your legal matters all rounded up and branded?"

"Yep. Not only that, but I settled our trouble with the Weathervane," Joe answered dryly.

Instantly Corcey's smooth manner was gone, and he was wary, sensitive. "What's that? You settled the feud? How?"

"By convincing Miss Miller that it was all sort of silly. That I wanted us to be friends, and stand together."

Corcey was a study in mingled emotions. "How stand together? Meaning just what?"

"The Weathervane says that Martin Hume has all the water bottled up, and won't let them get their beef to market. I promised to try to help 'em beat the squeeze-out game."

Coaley Corcey warned: "You're a damned fool if you throw in with them against Martin Hume. The big rancher will bust you so quick it'll make your head swim."

"How come you're so concerned for my welfare, Coaley?"

The ranchman became mellow. He spoke gently: "After all, you're the half-brother of my late saddle pal. And besides, since we're partners you'll get us both dehorned if you take sides against Hume."

"I see your last point all right, and I'll make certain that no blame of mine falls onto you."

When Joe Key turned in that night he realized that a delicate situation had fallen between him and Coaley Corcey. And it would grow steadily more dangerous as time went along. They would never be amicable ranch partners. Just how it would end Key could not foresee.

During the days which followed, Joe Key checked up and found it true that all the waterholes in the area which herds must cross in order to reach a shipping point, were in the hands of Martin Hume. Nobody could camp at any of them against Hume's will. The big ranchman pretended generosity, however, save toward those owners whom at the moment he was trying to squeeze out.

JOE KEY rode to the M H Bar to see Martin Hume. He had grunted enigmatically to Coaley Corcey's questions before leaving the Cinco, and his ranch partner had warned: "If you're smart you'll make it a good-will trip. Should you try to beard the old he-lion in his den you'd get a terrible clawing." Joe had ridden away without giving him any satisfaction.

Joe Key's right hand was bandaged, and resting in a sling when he reached the M H Bar. He found Martin Hume tinkering around alone at the horse corral. To Key it was suspiciously like a "set-up," as if he had been expected. He shuttled glances about, but saw no one else. Despite the peaceful aspect of the place, however, he had a distinct premonition that the ranch was lethal.

Martin Hume peered shrewdly from the habitually narrowed eyes. He smiled, removed a cigar from his mouth and drawled: "Well, Key, surprised and glad to see you. What happened to the gun-hand?"

"Nothing serious," Joe Key answered mysteriously. "It can still handle hardware in an emergency."

Martin Hume passed the subject. "I hope you've come to tell me you'll throw in with me, in spite of the fact you're half-owner in a two-bit spread." He certainly was a man who got right down to business.

Joe Key took another look all around. Then he countered: "Mr. Hume, I've thought a lot about your remark that I'd be working for you anyway. Just what did you mean?"

The hard blue eyes narrowed still

more. "Don't you know by this time?"

"If I did, would I be asking?"

"Key, just why did you come out here?"

Again it was pointblank business. Joe Key met it squarely. "I come to rep for some small ranches, including the Cinco and the Weathervane. With roundup time so near we're all wondering how about water when we're ready to drive."

Hume's smile vanished. He asked slowly: "What's your interest in the Weathervane, cowboy?"

Key shot back: "The same that I have in the Cinco. Whatever happens to the Weathervane can and probably will happen to all the small spreads."

"All right, Key, you've laid 'em on the table. I'll do likewise. I've a little private feud with the Weathervane. Since the Cinco had one also, I figured that in a sense we'd be working together. The Weathervane has been mighty troublesome, cowboy—a sort of thorn in the M H Bar's side. In self-defense I'm forced to take the spread over. I've started to squeeze—and no Miller cattle will water at my springs."

Key's dark gray eyes became smoky. "They might band with others, become part of a powerful drive," he threatened.

The ranchman took another pull at his cigar. The pale blue eyes were glittering again. The masterly forcefulness of him was evident now, seemed to emanate from his tall figure and stand about him in an invisible aura.

"Joe," he said deliberately, "you're a man of resourcefulness and nerve. A fellow like you makes a valuable ally or a dangerous enemy. You've told me I can deal you out of my game, not even asking what you'd have to gain if you took a hand on my side. If I allowed you to stay at the Cinco until the showdown with the Weathervane, you would cause me no end of trouble."

Joe Key sensed grim intent behind the deliberate words. Again he shuttled glances about, and this time he saw danger on all sides. Yes, his coming had been expected all right. Lake Kincannon had stepped out of the barn. Two waddies carrying Winchesters had emerged from the bunkhouse and were strolling toward the corral. Another tough looking pair had stepped out from behind the windmill tank.

Cold riffles ran along Key's nape. He told himself that Hume's plan was to have him murdered, or held prisoner until the man's purpose with the Weathervane and perhaps the Cinco had been worked out. His eyes flicked back to the malicious ones of the cattleman.

"So that's the way it is," he observed bitterly.

Hume simply nodded. Joe Key leaned forward in his saddle, smiled to fool the onlookers.

Then he said rapidly in a low voice: "Take a look at this bandaged hand peeping from the sling, Hume! See the gun in it? I was afraid there might be just such a trap as you've sprung, and I'd be riddled if I openly tried a draw, so I prepared a little trick of my own." His smile hardened then and he snapped: "Climb onto your horse and ride out with me a safe distance from the ranch! Better say something to your men that'll make 'em stay put, for if the trap springs I'll blow your light out."

Hume's narrowed eyes stared at the gun muzzle in a fascinated way. Key held his breath. Would the ranchman throw in his cards, or would he call the bluff?

CHAPTER V

Gunfight Gamble

FOR just a few seconds the nerve-straining tension held, while danger closed in like the slow tightening of a snake's coils. Then Martin Hume for once admitted defeat—temporarily at

least. In so doing he showed that he could be a good loser. He smiled, shrugged, turned toward a saddled horse which stood nearby.

To his henchmen the big man called: "Taking a little ride with Key. Back shortly."

Those men gazed wonderingly as the two riders moved away. Hume seemed unperturbed, even mildly amused. He was armed, but his right hand stayed well away from his gun. Joe Key had kept him closely covered every second.

Out in the scattered scrub Hume said: "Well, you won that play. What's your next?"

"This." Key took the man's Colt, unloaded it, tossed it away. "You can get it on the way back. I'm taking you with me two-three miles, to guard against your dispatching gunnies who might overtake me."

He talked earnestly to Martin Hume after that. But it was wasted breath. The tremendous force of the man's will could not be changed with mere words.

Hume told Key finally: "I admire you, cowboy—damned if I don't, but I'm stamping you into the ground nevertheless. Couldn't afford to have anybody like you bucking me. You started war between us—I'm finishing it. You're not driving out any cattle, understand? I'll squeeze, and squeeze, then finally take over the Cinco. I'll settle with Coaley Corcey for his share, since he causes me no trouble. You can't win."

They stopped, and gazed at each other. Both were challenging, unafraid, determined — two strong men, one young, the other well past middle age.

Joe Key said bleakly: "There's one way I could win for myself, Arizona Miller, and the other small ranchers. And that's by killing you right here and now."

Hume nodded unperturbed. "Yes, you could, but you won't. You're not that kind. Knowing this—that you wouldn't shoot a harmless, unarmed man in the back just because he ignored your gun—I'm saying so-long." He reined his mount about and went loping away down the trail. Key gazed at him moodily for a moment, then headed in the opposite direction. He, too, was forced to admire cool courage, even in an enemy.

Atop a small hill Joe Key drew a pair of spy-glasses and watched Martin Hume arrive at the corral. He saw a crowd surround the ranchman. Then it broke up. A man led a claybank horse from between two haystacks and walked up to the house with Hume.

Key's mouth set in grim lines. That second man was Coaley Corcey. Now Key knew why his arrival had been expected. Corcey had got to the M. H. Bar ahead of him. As he rode on toward Calloway, Joe Key was even more somber than before. He was telling himself that there would have to be a showdown between himself and his ranch partner.

Since it was hardly likely that Corcey would pass up Calloway without a stop, Joe Key waited for him there. He had been watching through a window less than thirty minutes, when he saw the rancher coming along the main street. Key was at a hitchrack in front of the Green Owl Saloon when Corcey dismounted there.

Smiling, Corcey asked in his suavest manner: "Well, how'd you come out at the M. H. Bar?"

Key blurted frigidly: "You ought to know, you were there."

The blunt reply jarred the synthetic smile from the man's handsome face. He quickly regained his mental poise, however. The black eyes were cold as he asked quietly: "Where'd you get that idea?"

"On a hilltop, from which I watched the M. H. Bar through spy-glasses. I savvy your game plenty well, Coaley. You figure to play ball with Martin Hume, cash in for all you can the while busting me and the Weathervane. Then you intend to double-cross Hume by trying to get the girl for yourself

at the last moment. Well, you won't get away with any part of it, hombre. If you don't play straight with me I'll shoot the buttons off your shirt. And as for Zona Miller—you can never win her by force or otherwise."

He would not have hurled the bitter words had he not been certain that they were true, had he not seen and heard convincing evidence. The sudden ripping away of the mask revealed Coaley Corcey as an insane devil. His sharply hewn features went so ashen that the black eyes were like charcoal in contrast.

He choked out hoarsely: "Damn you, Key, after that talk it's either you or me, in a shoot-out. Hit it!" His right hand slapped a gun butt.

JOE KEY had unslung and unbandaged his own right hand while talking with Martin Hume. Corcey's challenge for a shoot-out had come with explosive suddenness. Nevertheless it found Key prepared, His forty-five quit leather with blinding speed. As it barked, a raw red wound jerked across Coaley Corcey's left jaw.

Corcey's rising gun exploded. Its slug brushed past one of Key's boots and chunked into the hard earth. The stricken man collapsed so hard that his head bounced when it struck the ground. He lay as if dead, but Joe Key knew that he was only unconscious from shock. The bullet had raked the jaw-bone.

Again there was excitement on Calloway's main street. This time the local lawman, Denny Bowles, made excuse for Joe Key. "I seen the ruckus. Coaley made the first move to draw. How come you two ranch partners gun-fought, cowboy?"

"He wants to play ball with Martin Hume—I don't," was Key's cryptic explanation.

He helped carry the wounded man to a doctor's office, was standing by when Corcey regained consciousness. In a cold, hard voice he told his business partner: "It's a cinch we can't go ahead and ranch together peaceable. Sooner or later one of us would kill the other. Neither of us has sufficient money to buy the other out. If we divided the outfit neither man would have enough range to carry on even a small spread. I therefore propose that we gamble for the outfit, Coaley, whole hog or none. I'll gun-fight you, cut cards with you, match coins, anything you like—winner to take all."

Corcey was sitting on a cot now. The doctor had dressed the wound and the two ranchers were alone. Corcey was calm after what had happened. His black eyes showed that he was thinking swiftly.

He mumbled the while he tenderly stroked the bandaged jaw: "You've showed me you can beat me in a shoot-out, Joe Key—and I never was a gambling man. I wouldn't buy your share even if I was financially able. If you've really got the guts to buy me out, though, and try to run that spread on your own, I'll make the deal possible."

"How?"

"You simply give me a lien on everything. Sale of what would have been your half of the cattle will take care of the first payment. If you fail to make a go of the ranch, then I'll bust you out and take over. So there you are, fellow. Put up or shut up."

The challenge, the sneer, the taunt in the voice and in the black eyes made Joe Key reckless.

"I'll put up," he clipped. "Come on, let's go see a lawyer."

Although reckless, Joe Key was not playing the part of a blind fool. He reasoned that if he could not make a go of the ranch without Coaley Corcey, then he could not succeed with him, either. He fully realized what a problem it was going to be to dispose of the beef cattle. But this problem must be met sometime anyway. It had to be solved or the little ranch was doomed.

The deal was consummated, the necessary legal papers drawn and signed. The enigmatic light deep in Coaley Corcey's eyes made Joe Key uneasy. He told himself: "I reckon he figures

I'll never be able to get any stuff to market, but damn his hide I'll show him different. I'll find some way to do it." And then he had a thought which sent him riding in haste, down to the Colorado River.

Joe Key had remembered that this was the day when the old Stern-wheeler *Emerald* was due in Needles Landing. And with that remembrance had come an inspiration.

He went aboard the river boat and talked with the skipper in the privacy of that officer's cabin. Captain "Uncle" Charley Regan was the typical paddy Irishman—pug nose, rusty hair, short pipe and all.

"Business? Thurrible, me bye, thurrible. With the mines paterin' out it looks like we might have to discontinue runnin' the river."

"That's too bad. But maybe what I've got to suggest will change the picture."

He then told of the local ranching situation. "I was just wondering," he proposed, "if you could take beef herds down river."

"Well, ye-es, it could be done. The uld *Emerald* is about shot anyway, and could aisy be changed into a cattle baut. Then there are the lighters that-'ve been used fer ore. With stout plank fencin' on 'em they'd serve to carry critters. But why should I take a take a chance on such a skame?"

"Because if it's successful it'll mean a new lease on life for the river freight traffic. Once landed below range controlled by Martin Hume, herds could be drove in safety from there on. If we demonstrate that the whole thing is practical, the small ranchers will stampede to give you their business."

The little Irishman slapped his wiry legs: "Faith, and I belave you're right! I'm of a mind to throw in with ye!"

This he finally agreed to do. The young rancher's eyes held a gleam of satisfaction as he headed back toward Calloway. Now," he muttered, "I'll show Coaley Corcey and Martin Hume something."

He was unaware, however, that Hume and Corcey had shadowed him out of Calloway. They had been curious to learn what he was up to. At the very moment they were watching him from a rimrock.

CHAPTER VI

Prowling Wolves

A ROMANCE as deep as it was quiet had sprung up between Joe Key Arizona Miller. Joe hurried to see his little comrade, told her everything. She expressed grave concern over his clashes with Martin Hume and with Coaley Corcey. But she brightened when he revealed his plan for getting his beef to market.

"Good boy!" she enthused. "Let me join you! Let me furnish half the steers for the experimental herd!"

He warned: "Things might not turn out a-tall like I hope. Enemies might try to blast my plans. There may be danger the whole way. Even if the cattle are loaded aboard the river vessels all right, they might get loose and stampede into the river."

"I'm willing to gamble along with you. Unless I get some beef to market soon I'll have to give up the Weathervane." She smiled then. "Anyway, there may not be the slightest hitch. Perhaps we can quietly gather the stuff and get it to the Colorado, even without anyone's knowing we're engaged in the venture."

Joe Key finally agreed to let her throw in with him. He hired three punchers whom she and Banty Dowd recommended. The assembling of the beef herd was a comparatively simple matter, since they needed only to sweep along the creek at watering times.

When all was ready, Joe Key told the mixed force of Cinco and Weath-

ervane riders: "During the drive to the Colorado there's going to be the minimum of sleep, and the maximum of hard riding and watchfulness. There may even be danger, every mile of the way. There'll be plenty of time to snooze after the steers are loaded, though, and until that time you'll be drawing double wages. Now hop to it."

The drive started at night, when a blessed coolness and silvery moonlight lay upon the range. Zona Miller rode by Joe Key's side, for she had insisted on accompanying the outfit.

"I'm sure there won't be the slightest danger," she smilingly told him. "Our enemies have received no inkling of what we're up to."

"I hope to gosh you're right," mumbled Joe.

At first the outfit followed the little stream which wriggled across the Cinco and the Weathervane ranges. Then the drive headed out across lonely, lava-strewn plains. From here on the outfit would have to depend on scattered springs. They all were on "friendly" range, however, and so were not watched over by Martin Hume's water guards.

On and on the weary cow-brutes marched, stirring up clouds of dust which at times harassed the drovers. There was constant guarding, little sleep, senses were always keyed—but nothing happened. When the outfit had arrived within a day's march of its destination, Zona Miller exulted to Joe: "You see? I told you! Hume and Corcey don't even know what's going on!"

Joe Key did not share her confidence. He still was haunted by a premonition. It seemed to the shrewd young ranchman that everything was going along too smoothly, under the circumstances. He had the uneasy feeling that human wolves were lurking along the trail, watching the outfit's every move. Perhaps those wolves were waiting until the last moment to attack.

AT sunup Joe Key told the punchers: "From here on we'll give 'em hell. We'll have 'em so tired by the time they reach the Colorado that they'll give us the minimum of trouble in loading. Be alert every minute. The country the rest of the way is mighty wild, and the dangers will be multiplied."

There was no untoward incident during the remainder of the drive, however. The outfit safely arrived at the Colorado, and immediately the men prepared to load.

Uncle Charley Regan blithely told Joe and Zona: "Glad ye made it all right. I guess like ye say, this experiment is goin' to mane a lot of business fer the river. That small-time rancher you sent to see me two days ago said he'd ship some stuff right away, if this outfit got through all right."

Instantly the hidden fears were leaping up within Joe Key. "The friend I sent?"

Uncle Charley was quick to note the expressions of alarm, and his own face became deeply serious. "Why, yes, the tall feller with the brownstone mug and the cauld eyes. Kin Lake, he said his name was."

"Uncle Charley," groaned Joe Key, "I didn't send anybody here. That man was a spy — Lake Kincannon, foreman for the M H Bar spread."

"The saints preserve us!" exclaimed the little Irishman. "And I let him rope me into tellin' him everything!"

"We must get the beef loaded and on the way down river pronto!" Key muttered anxiously.

As if expecting to find approaching danger, his eyes turned to the lonely expanse of badlands which lay to eastward along the river. But he saw only morose stillness over there. The cow-prodders worked with feverish haste.

Banty Dowd said to Key and Zona: "Since the enemy knowed what was up, I cain't understand why we wasn't stampeded."

"Maybe they realized they were

beaten—didn't want to resort to open attack," the girl ventured.

Joe Key said nothing, but he was of a far different mind. The young rancher was greatly worried, still filled with premonitions — although just why his enemies had not struck, what they were waiting for, puzzled him. He breathed a vast sigh of relief when finally the last steer was loaded.

"Now—the quicker we unrope and get going the better I'll like it," he told the skipper.

"And that'll be domned quick, me bye."

That mysterious river of strange whims and varying fortunes was rapidly swelling, due to downpours far up in the distant mountain ranges. When the *Emerald* and her string of lighters was well under way, the dog-tired, haggard-eyed punchers got something to eat and then turned in to catch up with their sleep.

Joe Key had urged Zona Miller to return home with some of the trail-hands, but this she had refused to do.

"I'm going to see the trip through," she had told him determinedly.

Seated on the upper deck, their backs against a bulkhead, they watched the rising moon and the swelling roll of the mighty river. Joe Key remarked as he stared away toward the semi-arid badlands: "Seems strange, so much water here and so little out there. A plumb shame. It ought to be divided up. Maybe some day it will be."

"Maybe," Arizona agreed. "But that day will take away the cattle ranches and bring farms."

Lightning cut through the moonlight. Above the desolate Death Range, clouds lay banked to the heavens. Now and then thunder muttered.

"Bluff clouds," casually remarked Joe Key.

"Perhaps not. It does rain in this country you know," the girl said smiling. "How do you suppose all the arroyos and cut-washes were formed, if not by rains?"

The steady churning of machinery, the slapping of the big stern-wheel, the soft snarling of water at the boat's sides—all were lullaby sounds to the tired couple. Key yawned and remarked: "Well, I don't understand it, but I guess we can rest easy from here on. I reckon like you said, our enemies balked at bringing on bloody war."

Zona murmured: "And—we don't need to worry about things at home, either—since—we asked the law to guard our spreads." Her head fell against his shoulder. Her deep breathing told that she was asleep. He smiled tenderly, laid a bronzed cheek on her soft, dark hair and closed his eyes. The next moment he, too, drifted into slumber.

JOE KEY found himself suddenly wide awake, heart pounding. He wondered fleetingly what had awakened him. A nightmare perhaps? Zona's slim form was still relaxed against him, in sleep.

He peered into the night. It was very dark now, for the "bluff clouds," as he had called them, had swallowed the moon and blanketed the sky. Wind gusted uneasily about the sun-blistered old boat. He could just dimly descry the turgid waters of the Colorado. The river had swollen so that he could not see its far edge. There were heavy riffles mid-channel, and scattered débris dotted the surface. The sullen waters gave forth a muted roaring as they swept along.

Key turned his eyes toward the fore part of the ship—and almost yelled in surprise. A flash of lightning had disclosed a horrible sight. It was that of a man humped grotesquely, and bearing a limp human form. The arms of the human burden dangled. The head wobbled. The pale face beneath the flurry of hair was mottled with blood.

"Good Lord!" Joe Key blurted hoarsely.

His violent start had awakened Zona Miller. She heard his muttered

exclamation and anxiously inquired: "What's the matter, Joe?"

"Gosh, I—I saw—"

Lightning again, just a faint flicker this time. By that eerie light the couple saw a group of figures that were like giant bats in the night. It was a bunch of struggling men. The next second there was velvety darkness again.

Zona Miller whispered sharply in terror: "Disaster has struck, after all. What's happening, Joe?"

"That's what I aim to find out. Wait here!"

"No, no! I don't want to be alone. I'm going with you."

"Maybe it will be safer, at that. But stay behind me. Throw yourself down flat if they start shooting!"

A prolonged roll of thunder went bumbling through the heavens. Rushing water rocked the *Emerald*, and snarled at her sides. From behind came the uneasy bawls of cattle. Crouched, and with a six-gun in his right fist, Joe Key went swiftly along the deck. Another flicker of lightning sent him flattening himself against a bulkhead. He could see no one forward. He flung a glance to ascertain if Zona, too, had flattened against the wall. Horror went leaping through him. The girl had vanished!

CHAPTER VII

PISTOL PLEDGE

FOR an instant as he stood there on the lonely deck Joe Key was in the grip of superstitious dismay. He realized in a flash that Arizona Miller must have been seized, a hand clapped over her mouth. For had she fallen overboard she would have screamed. Key went bounding for a nearby stairway. He skidded to a stop, crouched and whirled as he heard a movement to his left. Flame spurted from an open doorway. As the report of a six-gun thundered in the cowboy's ears he felt a bullet jerk at a side of his shirt.

Evidently the gunman there in the dark meant to give him no chance at all, was bent upon murdering him in cold blood. Key dared not fire in return. The killer might be holding Zona Miller as a shield.

Key hunched himself very low and charged. Another shot pounded upon his eardrums. He felt this slug go through his Stetson, then he collided with a human bulk. Even in the deep gloom he recognized his antagonist. It was Tug Gossett, the ruffian whom he had battled in the Green Owl Saloon, the day he first had entered Calloway.

The burly, murder-bent gunman had stepped out onto the deck, in his eagerness to make sure of the young ranchman. This time two pistols thundered, but Gossett had knocked Key's gun aside. Key had seized Tug's right wrist. One bullet crashed into the bulkhead. The other skipped from the gunwale and plunged into the river.

There was no girl here. Gossett and Key stumbled to the rail, locked in fierce combat. Joe Key was wondering frantically what had become of Zona. He prayed briefly, in silence, for her welfare. He hoped that the shooting would bring help—if his friends were not all captives, or dead.

Each man was keeping the other's Colt shoved well aside. Tug Gossett's bull-like rush swept his lighter opponent back to the rail. Key stumbled. Tug rammed hard with a thick shoulder while the rancher was off balance. Key went overboard. As he splashed heavily into the water he heard once more the report of Tug's pistol. The bullet ripped through Key's shirt and grazed his hard flesh.

He went under. The muddy flood seized him, whirled him around, over and over. Weighted with his range attire, he was terribly handicapped. It seemed that he would never be able to fight his way to the surface. In desperation he shucked himself clear of his

bullhide chaps. Now he managed to battle his way up.

As air swept into his lungs he gasped, sputtered, then he was floundering heavily. He swiveled his head and peered anxiously into the blackness. A great bulk loomed beside him. It was one of the lighters, loaded with cattle. Key began battling his way toward it.

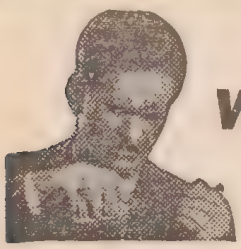
He heard the *slosh-slosh-slosh* of water against the lighter's side. That wooden wall was gliding past him. He threw up a hand in a blind grab for some hold, but the tense fingers slipped along a wet surface. He experienced a feeling of bitter disappointment. And then he remembered some cleats that served as a ladder, amidship. He found them, and grabbed anew. The snarling river swept at him, almost tore him away—and then all ten fingers were gripping firmly.

He mounted, stood holding to the plank fencing which barred in the cattle. Earnestly he peered toward the great bulk of the *Emerald*, but saw no one. Her dim lights were like swaying fox-fires in the night. The old craft looked ominous, lethal just now. Joe knew that she was laden with human danger, and yet he was desperately anxious to get back aboard the vessel. He believed that his friends were captives there. He must try to rescue them, and save the shipment of cattle.

Quickly he pulled off his boots, then stripped to the waist. He had lost his pistol, so he must brave the danger with no other weapon than a pocket knife and his bare hands. Key made his way around to the tow-rope, got a firm grip on it. He dropped into the water and began making his way hand over hand along the line.

AGAIN aboard the *Emerald*, Joe Key stood and listened. Water streamed from his pants and pooled about his bare feet. He heard only the rumbling of the river, the churning of machinery and the stern-wheel, the lusty soughing of wind. Mystery rode the Colorado that night—mystery and peril. Swiftly, silently, Joe Key started forward.

There was frequent lightning and thunder, but no rain. Glancing overhead, Joe Key could see that the clouds were ragged, wind-blown things. Swiftly he tried to analyze the situation there aboard the old river steamer. The enemy must have been waiting at some convenient point, and put out in a rowboat to board the *Emerald*. This the men had been able to do unnoticed under cover of the intense



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darkness. But why had the attack been delayed so long? This was a question for which Joe could find no answer.

As he stole swiftly along the deck Joe Key was trying to think of where he might get something that would serve as a weapon. He had heard of belaying pins, but he doubted if there were any on this river steamer. Anyway, where would they be? By this time he was close to the little room that had been assigned to him. His equipment was there, and he thought suddenly of his lasso and his stock-whip. Puny weapons against guns, but far better than none at all. He quickly armed himself with the things. The rope in one hand, the coiled whip in the other, he stepped out into a dark passageway.

He stopped against a wall as a harsh laugh reached his ears. The voice of Gopher Naith came faintly to his ears: "Your identifyin' me and my pardner Tug Gossett here on the boat won't profit you nothin', gal. We'll never return to the old stompin, ground noway. You'll be set ashore right soon. The beef will go on down river and be sold—but not for the interest of you and Joe Key." Again the taunting laugh. "It was a neat trap you walked into. We-all practically let you two rustle your own cattle, for us. The big idee was to let you bust yourselves, savvy?"

Joe Key savvied, whether the girl did or not. With his cattle stolen he could not make the necessary payment to Coaley Corcey. His erstwhile partner could foreclose, and wipe him out.

Key hurried silently toward the place from which the voice was emanating. There a slide-window was open, and sickly light was shed into the dark passageway. He slid along the wall and peeped. At the very first glance his jaw went craggy.

Gopher Naith was seated astraddle a chair, back turned toward the window. Before him bound to another chair, and gagged, was Zona Miller. Her hair was tousled, her clothing torn. The big eyes were tragic in her pale face. Key hated Gopher Naith more intensely than ever in that moment. The fellow had sworn revenge before he had left the Cinco ranch, following the whipping Joe had given him. Doubtless he was satisfied that he was reaping it this night.

Key's brain worked swiftly. How could he remove this human obstacle without creating alarm? Gopher himself offered a solution of the problem. He got up lazily, turned toward the door. "I'm goin' out and see how things are comin' along, honey. Don't miss me too much. I'll be back in a jiffy."

STROKING a cigarette which he was forming, he stepped into the gloomy passageway. Like the striking of a snake Joe Key's right arm lashed in the darkness. He had quickly flattened himself against the bulkhead beside the door. The loaded handle of his stock-whip cracked against Gopher's head and the man crumpled.

Joy flooded through Zona's wide eyes as Joe Key stepped into the room. He slashed her loose and removed the gag.

She said huskily: "Thank heaven, you're alive, Joe! I—"

"Hurry! Help me with the snake!"

They bound and gagged the unconscious man. Zona had whispered the while: "It was Lake Kincannon who seized me and clapped a hand over my mouth. Coaley Corcey, Martin Hume, and Tug Gossett are also aboard. I heard them all talking."

"Well, this leaves only four to deal with," said Joe, as he gave Gopher's bonds a final vicious jerk. "Come on. Where at are them other hombres?"

"Tug is watching over the captain, who is tied to the wheel. Coaley is below, guarding the punchers who were captured in their sleep. I don't know where Martin Hume and his foreman are."

Key reasoned swiftly that the unconscious and bloody-faced man whom he had seen being carried, was his

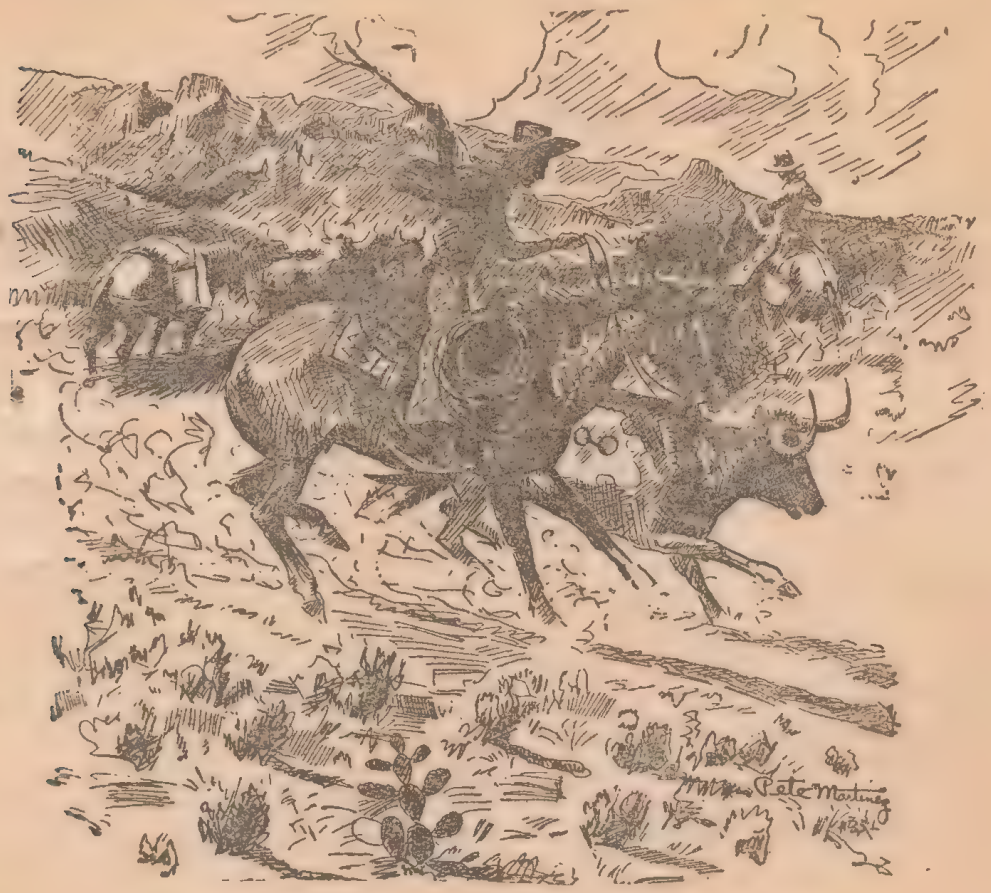
cowboy watchman who had been slugged while on duty. He decided first to take care of Tug Gossett and free the little Irish skipper, then to go below and free his cowboy friends.

A short distance from the wheelhouse the couple paused, and crouched in the darkness. They could see Captain Regan in his threadbare old officer's coat, standing at the wheel, wrists bound to spokes by short lengths of rope. The pirates had not dared take over the dangerous piloting job themselves. A dim light burned over the old man's head. Tug Gossett was standing behind the skipper, taunting him, threatening.

Joe Key had armed himself with Gopher Naith's pistol. Nevertheless he whispered to Zona: "This here is a dangerous situation. We've got to take him quiet-like, or we'll have the others on our necks. Since he's standing in that light I couldn't get to him without being seen. If I tried to hold him up he might bawl an alarm, so—

He dropped onto one knee, drew his pocket knife and a cartridge. Quickly he extracted a .45 caliber bullet and split it. This lead he clamped to the end of his stock-whip.

Zona whispered as he got up: "What's the idea?"



"This!" With a deliberate pitch of his right arm he sent the whip uncoiling into space. Without letting it touch the deck, he swept it backward. Suddenly then, with the swiftness of lightning, it was cutting through the thick gloom.

The practiced ex-Gaucho's aim was unerring. Tug Gossett was standing spread-legged just outside the wheelhouse. The lead at the end of the whip-cracker caught him behind the right ear and he dropped as if he had been shot.

Uncle Charley Regan cast a sur-

prised glance over one shoulder as Joe and Zona ran up.

"The saints be praised!" he breathed huskily.

The young ranchman cut him loose. "Grab that gun and then go on herdin' this boat! If you don't she's plumb apt to pile up pronto!" He swiftly gathered the pieces of rope which had been used on the skipper, began using them to hogtie Gossett.

Just as he finished the job a cold voice came out of the darkness: "All right, Gaucho, up with 'em! Wup! Keep your hands on the wheel, skipper!"

Joe Key jerked up his head, dimly saw Martin Hume and Lake Kincannon standing in the gloom. Instantly Key's mind was made up. Zona was out of the line of fire, so he dived aside.

Flame streaked in the darkness and gun thunder jarred his eardrums. He felt one bullet scorch across his back, the other smash into the deck. His own pistol barked and Hume went stumbling backward. The young rancher's six-shooter crashed a second time within that same instant, and Hume's knees caved.

Despite the order which Hume had spoken, Uncle Charley had lunged away from the wheel and started shooting. Joe Key saw Lake Kincannon whirl around like a tree caught upright in a maelstrom. Then the foreman went down and his heels rapidly kicked a bulkhead.

"Get back to your wheel, skipper!" Joe Key went bounding to Lake Kincannon. By this time the foreman was dead. Joe turned toward Martin Hume, then stiffened. Zona Miller had screamed sharply.

The same old trick! Coaley Corcey had slipped up out of the blackness and seized the girl, as she stood on the deck.

"Drop that cutter, Gaucho!" he yapped at Joe Key. Then, without waiting for Key to obey, he began shooting.

With a wriggle of her body Zona had knocked his gun aside and the bullet ripped into a bulkhead. The next instant she was struggling with her captor. There was surprising strength in the girl's slim form. She and Corcey had instantly fought to the rail. Now with a sudden bend and a twist she sent the man overboard. He let out a squawk of terror, then struck with a mighty splash.

Somehow he managed to fight his way to the surface. Lightning showed his horrified face.

"Help!" he yelled. "I can't swim! I —" Then he was gone. The yellow, turgid flood had closed over him, and he did not reappear.

Martin Hume spoke weakly: "That's what I call mopping up, folks. Your troubles are over, I guess. My brother, who'll inherit the big M H Bar spread, is a parson—believe it or not. Never did approve of my tactics. It's free water—for everybody—now on." He was dead then.

Zona Miller was weeping in horror. Joe Key went to her, passed an arm about her waist. "Come on, honey, let's go down and release our pals."

She clung to him. He kissed her. They heard Uncle Charley Regan say: "Bless ye, me young ones, it's clear sailin' ahead."

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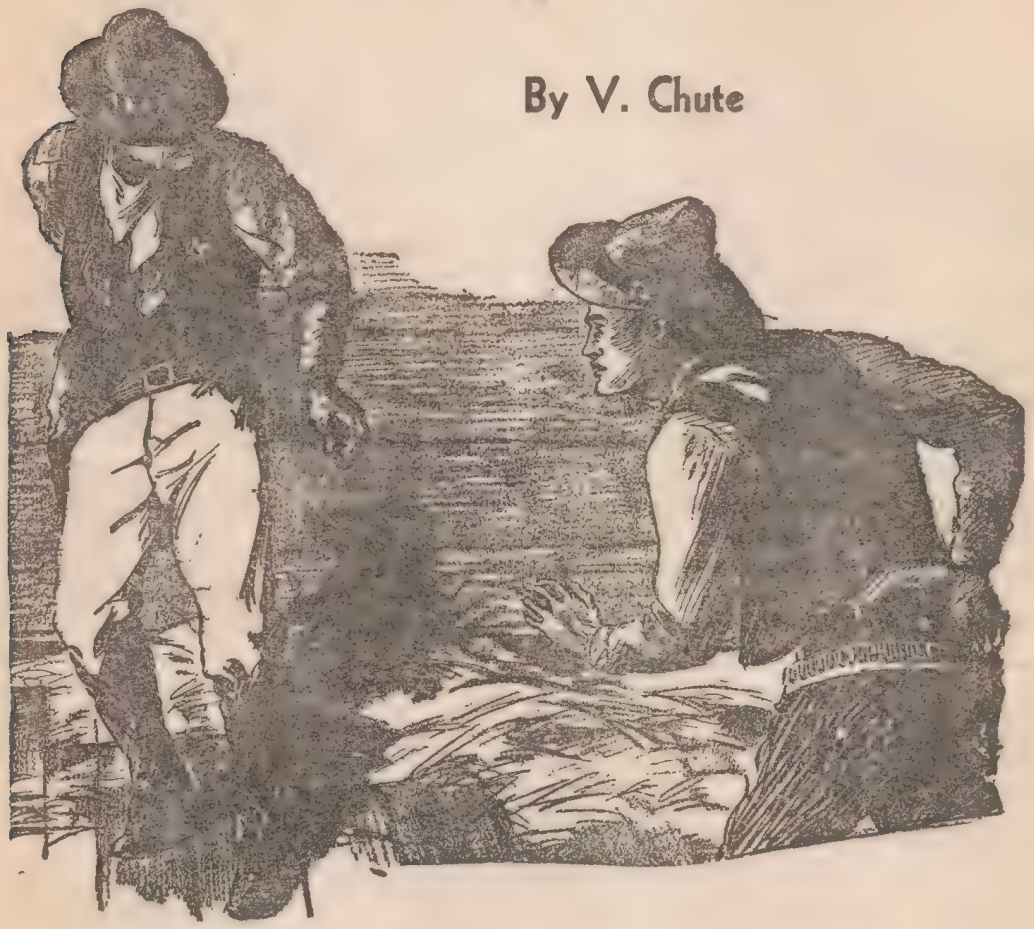
Hell-Fire Hits Back

By V. Chute



THAD BRECKER'S thin lips warped into a scornful smile as he squinted his green eyes at the group of Bottle Neck cowboys lining the Red Lily bar in Cloudburst.

"Hell, there ain't a hoss, wild or not, in th' whole of th' Mojave that I can't tame."

"Happy Jack" Lane of the Bottle Neck Spread, which lay below Strawberry Peak, suppressed a snicker. "There's one! Yuh never had a line over th' head of that blond stallion, 'Hell-Fire.' He's like a wildcat—it takes only one to catch him, but it takes two to turn him loose!"

"Yea, boy!" confirmed another rider. "That used to be th' boss's hoss. But we had to either turn him loose or shoot him. Most of us wisht we'd shot him."

Happy Jack smiled all over his round face. "Hell-Fire is damn hard on fences, hits th' posts with his front feet. But Old Wiley wouldn't let us shoot that hoss. He thinks too much of that little stallion.

"Th' old man said that that outlaw bronc would appreciate livin', might even come in handy some day. But all that bronc's ever done for th' old man was to steal his mares. That's

why we run him off this range. He's a mare stealer from 'way back!"

Brecker's teeth almost hung over his lower lip as he listened to the cowboys. His slitted eyes concealed the fact that he had already caught the little bay stallion, and had him corraled at his own place five miles back in the hills. But the horse wrangler's eyes were concealing other things as well. He rubbed his lean jaw.

"So he's a bad one, eh? Well, th' next time you jaspers see that hoss he'll be so tame you can feed him out of a spoon. I aim to catch that bronc next—pronto an' sudden-like. He hangs out around Stoddard Well."

The cowboys looked at the horse wrangler darkly. They knew of the brutal methods of Thad Brecker. In fact, Old Jim Wiley, boss of the Bottle Neck ranch, would have no dealings with the man at all. He had seen the man breaking his horses—stunning them with a club, starving them into submission.

Happy Jack's smile was gone now. He said quietly: "I reckon th' boss'll want you to stay away from that Hell-Fire!"

Before the surly Brecker could answer, the batwing doors of the saloon burst open. The cook on Sunday duty at the Bottle Neck dived inside, came gibbering to the bar as he tried to speak. Finally he was able to burst out:

"Old Wiley—he's dead, killed! His money box broke open!"

"What!" shouted the saloonkeeper. "Say that again!"

Stunned, Happy Jack stared at the man. "Th' boss—dead?"

The cook nodded excitedly. "There—there was a knife in his back."

Brecker rolled himself a smoke with steady hands and listened to the startling information without emotion or surprise. But Happy Jack was all action now.

"Come on, men," the cowboy said urgently. He grabbed one rider by the shoulders. "You go find th' sheriff—he's back in th' hills somewhere chasin' hoss thieves."

In a mad scramble the saloon emptied of all except Thad Brecker and the bartender. Hal, the saloonman, was as stunned by the information as the cowboys had been. But the horse wrangler had to fight back the look of relief that came to his thin face.

DRAGGING his cigarette from the corner of his mouth, Brecker hid his lack of surprise in an upturned glass of whisky. Old Wiley was dead, the stolen money well hidden, so why get excited? His thin fingers circled the whisky bottle. He moved his long frame over to a table and muttered to himself from the corner of his mouth. "It's a damn good thing I was here in th' barroom when th' word come in about Wiley. Th' boys are sure hot under th' collar."

The saloonkeeper wiped away at a glass he had forgotten to wash. "Old Wiley was as square as they make 'em," he mumbled. "Yeh, he was—" His voice broke, harsh and shrill. "Th' polecat that killed him is lower than a sidewinder's belly. Damn me, I'd like to set th' killer up with just one drink. Would I poison it, I'm askin' you?"

Brecker made no comment, but he scowled as if in agreement. He had nothing to fear. He had planned the robbery well, and at a time when Wiley was alone in his ranch house. A silent dirk had done the trick. In the early morning hours no one had seen him go to the ranch, no one had seen him leave. When the murder was finally discovered he was right here in the Red Lily Saloon drinking with the boys from the Bottle Neck.

The barkeep grunted at him. "Hell, th' boys can't do much without Sheriff Whipple, and he ain't got back yet. He's out after hoss thieves that broke into th' Bottle Neck corrals and stole Old Wiley's brood mares."

Brecker cursed softly and hid a grin. He hadn't stolen any horses

since he came to this country six months ago. "Hoss thieves?" he asked.

"I reckon." The shiny-topped bartender gave him an odd look, then went into the back room to replenish his stock.

Brecker shrugged his shoulders. He wouldn't have to stay around here long. As soon as the hue and cry for the murderer died out, he would take his stolen money and hit the long trail for a Mexican border town and live like a king.

His face suddenly clouded as he looked toward the back room. "Brood mares stolen! Damn, that sounds like that Hell-Fire stallion. But I know better than that," he told himself. "That bronc is up in my dry pasture right now, starvin' for water."

But if he could have seen inside his hidden pasture at that moment he would have been on his feet, rushing for his mount. The stolen mares were on a tour of inspection and leading them was Hell-Fire.

Brecker wiped his chin with the back of a hairy hand and pushed back in his chair to make himself comfortable. He fumbled for the "makin's" and grunted. "I better stick around in Cloudburst for th' rest of th' day. It'll look better until things cool down."

Hal came back into the room, carrying a load of bottles and shaking his head dolefully. "That sheriff is going to be one mad hombre when he finds out about poor Old Wiley bein' murdered. Hell, hoss thieves can wait!"

"Yeh," Brecker agreed craftily. "There's plenty of hoss thieves any day in th' week. I even have lost some damn good mounts which I took months to break."

The barkeep arched his brows sharply. "Never heard of you losin' any hosses."

Brecker grinned. "That's right—nobody has but you. I don't want it said I can't take care of my stock."

"Well, you should have made a fuss. Old Sheriff Whipple don't stand for any monkey business. Once he gets th' goods on a hoss stealer he gets himself so excited he forgets that he's supposed to use a rope."

BRECKER glanced out through the batwing doors where it was already getting dark. "Don't worry about th' sheriff. Reckon I'll go down to th' Chink's an' feed, then go on home." He swung his lanky frame up out of his chair, paid his bill and lunged through the door with his pair of six-guns swinging at his legs.

The barkeep nodded, but when Brecker was out of sight he slipped a hard look after him. "If I didn't know that jasper was right here today when Wiley was killed, I'd be thinkin' a lot of things!"

Despite Brecker's declaration that he was going home when he had finished eating, he was back in the Red Lily by the time that Happy Jack got back from the Bottle Neck ranch. The rider's face was clouded with pain, but his pale blue eyes were bitter.

"Old Wiley never had a chance. A knife was in his back. There's no trace that we can find of the murderer, but I sent a couple of the boys back in the hills after th' sheriff."

Brecker thought that it was time that he should take part in the conversation. "Cowboy, if I can help—I know all th' passes around here from trappin' wild hosses."

The tophand looked at him strangely. "Th' sheriff's likely on th' job now."

Brecker thought that over. He asked a question, then held his breath for the answer. "Who do you think done for that boss of yours?"

Happy Jack looked at the horse wrangler coolly. "I'm not sayin'."

Brecker stared back. "Yeh, I got ideas, too," he said harshly. "Mebbe forty a month an' found ain't money enough for some of th' Bottle Neck hands."

Happy Jack's jaw stiffened. "What

do you mean by that? Mister, explain them words!"

Brecker grinned hastily. "Don't get hot—nothin' personal. I know that you was in here when we got th' news of th' old man's death."

A charged tense silence followed that remark. Casey, the bar boy, began lighting the swinging lamps, while out of the dusk came cattlemen to demand if it were true that their friend, Old Wiley, had been killed.

The men talked in groups and cast suspicious glances along the bar. Brecker felt those glances and was ill at ease. A sudden fear possessed him, but he threw it off with a laugh. Hal, the bartender, would tell them that he had been here all day.

Suddenly all eyes swung towards the front. The doors banged wide open. Followed by two of his deputies, in came the stern-faced Sheriff Whipple. Blinking under the yellow, flickering light of the swinging lamps, he turned a hard gaze at each group, then came straight ahead. His deputies slid along on either side of him, their faces hard, bodies half crouched, ready for gunplay. Across the arm of one hung a coil of rope.

Sheriff Whipple stopped in front of the horse wrangler. His hard mouth barely moved. "Brecker, keep your mitts on th' bar!"

"Huh—me?"

"Yeh, you!" The lawman's gnarled hands hung in the air, waist high and ready. "We got you to rights this time," he growled.

Thad Brecker's face turned a sickly gray. "What—what yuh mean?"

"You never covered your tracks!"

Brecker cursed in dismay. "Hell, I been in town right along. Ask anybody—ask th' bartender." He stared at the men moving stealthily away from the bar, then looked through the corner of his eye at the side door.

Sheriff Whipple was smiling thinly. "I don't care how long you've been in town." His body tensed, his tone was hard. "I always give you coyotes a chance. Stick your hands in th' air and wait for th' rope—or go for your guns!"

Brecker snarled. He half raised his hands, then dived for his guns and leaped for the side door all at the same time. But the sheriff never moved in his tracks. Like magic his six-guns leaped into his hands. Brecker gave a startled cry, and fell headlong to the floor, dead.

Sheriff Whipple holstered his smoking six-guns, gave a sharp order to his deputies. He turned to the bar.

"Well, Hal, one less hoss thief."

"Hoss thief?" The barkeep looked his incredulity. "Why—why—"

"Hal, you got th' look in your eye that tells me you think we got th' wrong man, and that Brecker wasn't th' hoss thief."

But the barkeep's look remained. "Mean to tell me, sheriff, that you shot Brecker for hoss stealin'?"

"What th' hell else did I shoot him for? We trailed Old Wiley's brood mares straight to Brecker's hills."

Hal's face froze with astonishment. "Now listen to me, sheriff," he argued, "I ain't findin' any fault with you shootin' him. What I'm aimin' to tell is this—"

Sheriff Whipple barked angrily. "Hal, you sound crazier than hell to me. We found those mares hidden in a draw inside Brecker's pasture, along with that stallion, Hell-Fire."

"To hell with th' mares, sheriff. Don't you know that Old Wiley was stabbed at his ranch? When Brecker went for his guns just now with you, it was proof to me that it was him who killed Old Wiley. Hell, man, that's what you shot Brecker for—an' he knew it!"

Astounded, Sheriff Whipple went over and dropped limply into a chair. "Well, damn me!" he said.

Happy Jack broke his silence. "That Hell-Fire stole them mares an' Brecker gets killed for it. Now that's revenge for yuh. Hell, sheriff, I reckon you killed th' right man—for th' wrong thing!"

Dynamite Range

Gripping Novel

His leg shot out to strike the lawman.

By Jack Drummond

CHAPTER I

COWMAN ON THE PROD

JIM PARODY was mad clean through when finally he wheeled his pony and spurred him back toward his little Slash Circle ranch house. His guns were there at the house. A .30-30 Winchester carbine stretched across a set of deer antlers above the fireplace. And a Frontier model Colt hung with belt and holster from a peg that had been driven into the log wall close to the head of the single bunk.

Jim Parody needed those guns now. It was time they came down and went into action. He had been foolish ever to think he could ride this thing out peaceably. Being range-bred, he should have known better. But Jim Parody was a friendly, easy-going individual. He was a tolerant man, slow to anger and a great believer in the finer traits of the human race.

At the age of twenty-five he had made the mistake of thinking that he could squat almost in John Gran-

One moment of letting his temper ride him sent men gunning for Jim Parody. For a dead man on a horse came back to his home ranch. And he toted a note that condemned Parody to a six-gun sentence by a hand-picked pistol posse.

ville's back yard, and then avoid the inevitable heat of Granville's reaction merely by turning his back on all threats of trouble.

Strangely enough, after his first memorable encounter with the grizzled, old cowman, Jim Parody's plan seemed to succeed. He was left strictly alone until his fences were up and his little herd of one hundred head of blooded Herefords was brought in. Then the devilment started. His fences were cut, his first little one-room shack was burned to the ground, and once his little herd was scattered from hell to breakfast.

It took Jim Parody two weeks to pop his critters out of the brush and get them bunched inside his fences again. He did it grimly, silently, and under the watchful eye of the Triangle G hands. The loss of eight head of those choice Herefords smoldered inside of Jim Parody. But Parody was a man of patience and determination. He considered the odds and knew that he could get nowhere fighting John Granville.

Granville's Triangle G spread over two-thirds of the entire district. The power of wealth and dominion was his. Right now, however, Jim Parody wasn't giving much thought to that power that he had heretofore recognized. Jim Parody was a man aroused and, like all men who are slow to anger, he was hell-bent on going as far to hunt trouble as he had to avoid it.

When the Triangle G took their spite out on Jim Parody's prized Herefords by salting his two springs they asked for trouble and Parody meant to see that they got it. To fight the man was one thing, but to center their grudge on his helpless critters was quite another.

Hell, a man had his limits. He couldn't stomach everything and anything just because he happened to be in love with John Granville's daughter. Probably a hopeless affliction anyway, decided Parody, turning all angles over in his mind as he pushed his pony toward his house and his guns.

Betty Granville had never given him more than a friendly nod and a pleasant word. She had merely treated him as an equal instead of a damned, tramp cowpoke with squatting instincts who had moved in on range and water that John Granville was in the habit of using. What hopes Jim Parody had built up were entirely of his own making and not from anything the girl had said or done.

Her time and interest were pretty much taken up with Doug Tilden, the Triangle G ramrod, and Burley Meeks, owner of the Bar M outfit which lay to the north of Jim Parody's place in the hill country. Both men were making a strong play for Betty Granville. And if Doug Tilden seemed to have the inside track it was probably because he was in closer contact with the girl, for Meeks had the looks and the prosperity of a fair-sized cow outfit. Meeks likewise had the jealousy of a vain man who knows his prestige is being threatened by one less fortunate in wealth and bodily grandeur.

Surprise waited at the ranch house for Jim Parody. He rounded a corner of the building and pulled up short when he saw a Triangle G cow-pony standing ground-tied in front of the building. Parody dropped from the saddle, started for the open doorway, then gave another start as he saw Doug Tilden framed in the opening.

THE Triangle G foreman appeared as much at home as though he lived there. He slouched one shoulder against the casing and let a grin run over a face that was bronzed and genial. His manner was assured, yet his right hand dangled conveniently close to the gun that sagged from his right hip. Perhaps the flushed expression on Jim Parody's face accounted for this.

"Howdy, Parody," he greeted in friendly fashion. "I came over to palaver."

There was no break in Jim Parody's stride, nor did he waste time and breath on words. Temper was riding him hard; temper that demanded an outlet in action.

Doug Tilden took another look at him, saw the mad glint in Parody's eyes and said: "Wait a minute, Parody!"

But there was no stopping Jim Parody. One of his enemies had been foolish enough to beard him in his own den and he meant to make the most of the occasion. Things were moving too fast for Doug Tilden. He hadn't figured that the easy-going Parody would assume this attitude. Parody was almost upon him before he decided that words would never stop the man. He cursed then and went for his gun.

Jim Parody leapt with the downward flash of Tilden's hand. His hundred and seventy pounds of bone and muscle struck Tilden, spoiling his draw and driving him back into the log cabin. They went down together upsetting the table and knocking a homemade cowhide chair spinning against the stove.

Tilden's gun exploded, boring twin holes in the stovepipe just below the elbow. A second bullet rattled the cover on a pot of frijoles that was sitting on the back of the fireless stove. Parody wrenched the gun loose then and tossed it across the room.

"You damned fool!" snarled Tilden. "Listen, will yuh?"

For answer Parody's left fist splatted against his mouth. Red anger surged through Tilden. He no longer sought to reason with the madman on top of him. He fought to free himself, get away from those blows that started driving into his face. He did pretty well until Parody grasped him by the hair and started beating his head against the floor.

No head could stand that kind of punishment for long. The strength seeped out of Tilden's muscles and consciousness left him. This unleashing of pent-up emotions was like a stupefying poison to Jim Parody's usually rational brain. It was a moment before he realized that Doug Tilden had ceased struggling. He got to his feet then and stared down at his handiwork. He had done a good job. Tilden lay there battered and bleeding and senseless. Temper was still riding Jim Parody hard. He felt no remorse. The Triangle G foreman had asked for this when, after salting the two springs, he had found crust enough to come here to the cabin and gloat over Jim Parody.

Well, he was doing no gloating now. Neither was Jim Parody, but he felt a lot of grim satisfaction in the fact that he had taken the first round in his recent determination to fight the Triangle G in a way they would understand. That this little fracas would probably bring the whole Triangle G crew out gunning for him, he didn't pause to consider. Odds didn't mean a thing to him at this moment.

He dragged Tilden out of the house, boosted him across the saddle and tied him on. He went back into the house and returned a moment later with a note that read:

John Granville:

Here is the carrion that you sent over to my place. Take a good look and judge accordingly. If it's war you want you'll find Tilden a good example of what I can dish out.

JIM PARODY.

He pinned the note to Tilden's shirt with a tenpenny nail, looped the reins up over the saddle horn and gave the

pony a slap on the rump to start him on his way home. He watched the pony out of sight and took his own horse down to the corral where he stripped off the gear and turned him into the enclosure.

Back at the cabin again he washed the dust and blood from his face and hands in a tin basin that sat on a bench nailed to the outside wall of his cabin close to the back door. When he went inside the cabin he found his gun, examined it to see that Tilden hadn't tampered with it and strapped it on.

He righted the table, located Tilden's gun and placed it on the stone mantel of his fireplace. His next chore was to plug up the holes in the stovepipe, after which he kindled a fire and put a dented copper teakettle on to heat.

HIS watch told him it was five o'clock, earlier than he was in the habit of cooking his evening meal. But it was better to get the meal over with this evening before the Triangle G had time to arrive. That they would come over, Jim Parody hadn't a doubt in the world. Doug Tilden was well liked among the crew. When they looked on the beating he had received they would be out for revenge. Jim Parody meant to be ready for them.

Parody was shoving a pan of biscuits into the oven when he heard the rolling hoofbeats of a fast running horse. Loosening the gun in his holster, he strode to the front of his house and looked out the door. Burley Meeks was pulling a quick, sliding halt in the yard.

Meeks' handsome face was troubled and an exclamation broke from his lips at sight of Parody.

"You blamed fool!" he ejaculated. "I was hoping I wouldn't find you here."

Parody relaxed. "Light and eat, Burley," he invited hospitably. "I'm feeding early tonight." Then, making a guess from the expression on Meeks' face, he added: "You must have met up with Doug Tilden."

"I did," answered Meeks flatly. He gave Parody a close, speculative glance. "You and him must have had quite a fight."

"Nothing much," shrugged Parody. "Tilden talk to you?"

"He wasn't doing any talking," said Meeks softly.

"Still out cold, was he?"

"He was dead!"

"Dead!" Parody's face tightened. He gave Meeks a sharp glance. "Reckon you must be mistaken, Burley. There was plenty of life in him when he left here except that his brain was kind of fogged up."

"He was dead," repeated Meeks and came close to Parody. "You must have hit him harder than you figured, Jim. I met up with him on the trail and examined him close. He is dead all right!"

A dubious scowl pulled across Parody's face. "I rapped his skull against the floor a few times," he muttered reflectively. "But, hell, none of those jolts were hard enough to kill him."

Meeks shook his head, deep concern showing in his eyes. "I don't know what came off here, Jim, but I do know that Doug Tilden was dead when I looked at him. I likewise know you signed your own death warrant when you pinned that note to him. I should have taken that note off him, but I figured you knew what you were doing."

Parody looked dazed. He backed into the house, invited Meeks to follow him with a motion of his hand. Meeks seemed nervous, anxious to be on his way.

"I can't stall around here until Granville comes with his crew, Jim," he protested. "You understand, I reckon. I'm your friend, but I'm likewise Granville's. I've sided you as much as I could in this trouble you've been having with the Triangle G, but I'm not making any open stand against Granville. You can't buck a

man like him. You were a fool for trying it. I came here only to warn you that you better slope and do it pronto."

"And leave my little spread here for Granville to gobble up!" exclaimed Parody. "What in hell do you think I am, Burley?"

"A plain idiot if you think you can stay here and fight John Granville," retorted Meeks. "He'll have your hide nailed to the fence before daylight tomorrow. You jumped into more trouble than you can handle when you killed Doug Tilden, Jim."

"I didn't kill him!" growled Parody.

Meeks gave his shoulders a hopeless shrug. "Try and make Granville or the law believe that. I don't believe it myself Jim. Maybe you didn't intend to kill him, but he's dead just the same. You're in over your head, friend. The only way out is to take a good run for yourself. And you better do it now before it's too late."

Parody's jaw set stubbornly. "Everything I own is tied up in this place," he growled. "I'm not quitting it now. If Tilden is dead it was an accident. I didn't mean to kill the man. He came here asking for trouble and I gave it to him. I've got no regrets. I found both of my springs salted today. A man who fights that way needs killing."

"It's your funeral," shrugged Meeks. "I like you, Jim. That's why I came here to warn you. But after tonight, if you live, there can be no friendship between us. You sabe, I reckon?"

Parody nodded. He understood Meeks' position well enough. Meeks was no cowman in his own right. At first he, like John Granville, had resented Jim Parody's arrival in the country. Both had looked upon Parody as a common squatter until he brought in his blooded Herefords. Then they had considered him a new kind of idiot with new-fangled ideas than ran to the breeding of graded stock and pure-bred bulls.

IN time Meeks came around taking an interest in Parody's ideas and offering a friendship that was readily enough accepted. Meeks was ambitious. He had visions of some day building up his wealth and dominion until it would eventually top John Granville's position in the district.

He envied John Granville both his daughter and his wealth, and envying him, bore him a secret hate. He kept that hate and envy a secret because he was no fool. He didn't yet have the strength to fight Granville openly, and he was determined that Betty Granville should become his wife. He couldn't openly fight the father of the girl that he intended to marry.

Jim Parody understood all this. He had appreciated Meeks' friendship, though he had never been able to like the man wholeheartedly. There was something about the man that rubbed him the wrong way, some indefinite thing that was felt rather than seen. Probably the deep-seated vanity and conceit that so influenced Meeks' every action.

"Thanks for stopping by, Burley," said Parody as Meeks turned to leave. "If I've dealt myself a tough hand, I'll play it out. This place is the only solid thing I ever had hold of and I'm not quitting it."

Meeks turned back, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What do you figure your outfit's worth, Jim?"

Parody gave him a quick glance that was sharp, quizzical.

"I mean," said Meeks, "I know how you feel about leaving it for Granville to grab. I can't pay you what it's worth. But I can give you enough to see you through until you get clear of the country, and maybe keep you in smokes and grub for a while after that. I can raise maybe five thousand in cash by tomorrow night. It isn't that I need the place or want it, but I'm the kind of a man who will go that far for a friend, Jim."

"Thanks," muttered Parody. "I won't unload something on you that you don't want, Burley. I'll hang with

this place till Granville runs me off and he'll have to do that with lead."

Meeks shrugged and turned away. "If you change your mind and should decide to slope, meet me over in Cougar Hollow tomorrow night. I'll have the money and a deed ready for you to sign. So long now, and good luck."

Parody watched him ride away, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. Meeks' offer was fair. It almost tempted him, for it lacked only a couple thousand of what Parody considered his place was worth. Maybe, after all, Meeks was the friend he had professed to be. Maybe his suspicions of the man were groundless. Certainly Meeks had gone a long way to prove himself a friend during the past year.

But Jim Parody was no quitter. He couldn't believe that he had killed Doug Tilden, but if Tilden was dead Parody meant to do no running. He would make his stand here on the little place that he had worked and slaved to get hold of.

He turned back into the house and went calmly and systematically about finishing the preparations of his evening meal. Trouble might be headed his way, but the threat of it hadn't relieved him of his appetite.

Later he sat in his darkened house waiting, the carbine resting across his knees. Light from a half moon broke the shadows around the cabin giving him a good view in all directions. Later, during those hours past midnight, there would be no moon and it was then that he looked for Granville to strike.

CHAPTER II

Posse Bait

THE night hours dragged. Jim Parody was hunched low, his eyes heavy-lidded when suddenly his keen senses picked up the slow, steady approach of a horse. He sat bolt upright, listening close. There was nothing stealthy about the horseman's approach. He came boldly, making no attempt to muffle the tread of his horse.

Outside the night was dark. Parody judged the time was somewhere between one and two o'clock. He crept close to the open doorway and cautiously peered out. The horseman was close. Suddenly he pulled a halt, and in a low voice called:

"Parody! This is Meeks."

Parody stiffened as he recognized Meeks' voice confirming the words. He wondered what Meeks was doing back here at this time of night. Questions paraded through his mind and he found answers for none of them. Wariness held him silent. Suspicion tugged at him. This might be a trap, though he knew no reason why Burley Meeks should sell him out.

His silence drew more words from Meeks.

"It's all right, Jim," Meeks assured him. "I just came by to tell you that the Triangle G is on its way over here to wipe you out. They're a dozen strong, Jim. You haven't got a chance. Take the advice of a friend and quit the flat—now!"

Suspicion still rode Parody for reasons that he couldn't explain. He had no logical reason for doubting Burley Meeks, and yet he did. It seemed to him that Meeks was taking more interest in his affairs and showing more concern about his welfare than the mild friendship that existed between them called for.

Meeks might have been sent here to hold his attention while Granville and his crew came up on him from the sides and rear. On sudden impulse Parody slithered out through the opening, moved for a way along the front of the building and took up a position close to the northwest corner.

From here his eyes made out the dark outline of Meeks still sitting his horse. Leather creaked as Meeks shifted uneasily in the saddle. Parody

watched him, wondering what his next move would be. His attention was abruptly turned from Meeks by a light footstep at the corner of the house. Parody whirled, started to recoil, but too late.

A shape came hurtling through the air at him, knocking the carbine from his grasp and driving him to the ground. More shapes came around the corner of the house and piled onto him. After that he didn't have a chance. Hands clawed at his throat. Others fouled his arms and legs. He was rolled over on his face and his hands were tied securely behind him. He was booted to his feet then with the bitter knowledge that Burley Meeks *had* led him into a trap.

"All set, Meeks," said a voice that Parody recognized as belonging to John Granville. "Catch up his horse and bring him up here."

The speaker stepped up close to Parody. "We're going to hang you, Parody," he stated bluntly. "Something we should have done before you got a chance to beat up on Doug Tilden and then gun-whip the brains out of him!"

"I did no gun-whipping," denied Parody.

"Then you must have used a neck-yoke," snarled Granville. "You sure didn't lay his head open like that with your fists."

"His head wasn't laid open when he left here and he likewise wasn't dead," retorted Parody.

"Save your lies," rasped Granville. "I'm bent on making a hanging out of this. But if you crowd my temper I'll shoot you down in your tracks, you damned calf-rustling, water-stealing maverick!"

GRANVILLE'S words about Tilden's head being laid open burned through Parody's brain. The cowman was either exaggerating or he was lying. Parody could find no reason why he should do either one. Still, there had been no lacerations on Tilden except the marks that Parody's fists had left on his face. He was interrupted in his pondering by the return of Burley Meeks with his horse. His thoughts went to Meeks, and a terrible hate for the man surged up inside him.

Damn a sidewinder who professed to be a friend and then worked that friendship to pull you into a trap. Parody would have given a lot to have had his hands free at that moment. He would have grabbed Meeks and choked the filthy life out of him.

Rough hands laid hold of Parody. They boosted him into the saddle and held him there, while his feet were lashed with a rope and passed beneath his pony's belly. Other horses were brought up. Men hit the saddle. Somebody gathered up the lead rope on Parody's horse. The grim cavalcade set off into the night, heading almost due east.

Parody didn't know their destination, but he guessed it to be the Santee River. There were cottonwoods and alders there, strung out mostly along the east bank. If there had been any hope in him of escaping this fate it died in him now. What cut him most was the knowledge that he had let Burley Meeks sell him out. He never had fully trusted the man. Still, he had never suspected that he was low enough to pull a mangy trick like this.

The men around him were blurred shadows that presently fell away to string out behind him as the trail they were following narrowed. Only one man rode close beside him and the night was too dark for recognition.

An odd thrill suddenly came to Parody when he felt the other horse crowd close to him. The rider's shoulder gouged his side as he bent low in the saddle. Parody felt a hand groping for his leg and foot. There was a faint, ripping sound as a sharp knife severed the rope that lashed his feet together. A minute later the piggin' string that bound his hands behind him parted and fell away.

"Sit tight," the lowered voice of Burley Meeks whispered in his ear. "Had to play it this way. Make your break at the river. Meet me in Cougar Hollow. Tomorrow night."

The jerky sentences were spaced seconds apart and came each time the gait of their horses jostled them close together. Parody rode as a man dazed. He didn't know what to think. First Meeks had drawn him into a trap and now he was making it possible for him to slip out of that trap. It was all a puzzle to Jim Parody. But his hands and feet were free and that was all that mattered to him now.

They came to the river. John Granville, who was riding in the lead with the man who held the lead rope on Parody's horse, put his horse to the water without hesitation. Nobody was riding close to Parody now. Burley Meeks had faded away from him right after cutting him loose and imparting his message.

When the water came even with his stirrups Parody slid off on the downstream side. He made a splash that caught the attention of one of the alert horsemen following close behind.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. Then the truth dawned upon him and he shouted: "Hold up—everybody! That dirty son has slipped his saddle and is away!"

A curse ripped from Granville. "Scatter out!" he bellowed. "Work both sides of the river and look close. We'll either drown him or sink lead in him!"

Water churned as horses were spurred toward both banks. Yells and curses rent the air. The current caught hold of Parody and carried him off downstream. His boots filled, making a dragging weight on his feet. His soaked clothes hampered his movements. He gave up trying to stay on top. He drew a long breath and swam under water with the current, coming to the surface only when his lungs demanded more air.

HORSES were racing along the banks as the Triangle G crew spread out, hoping for sight of him. Parody knew that he couldn't stay with the stream too long, for it was taking him down toward the Triangle G range and open country. He had to get clear of it before it spread out of the rolling country.

He headed for the west bank and came to the surface just as a horseman pulled even with him. For one breathless second he thought he had been seen, but the rider went by and passed on downstream. Parody came out of the water, clamored up the bank and, bending low, raced away from the stream.

Water chugged in his boots with each step. The weight of them coupled with the drag of his wet clothes soon had him puffing like a wind-broken plow horse. He stumbled into a dogwood thicket and dropped to the ground. He lay there listening to the noise and curses of the searchers. The sounds grew fainter as they worked on downstream.

Parody emptied the water from his boots, struggled to get them back on his feet. He started on again, angling his course so that it would take him into the ridges and canyons that lay to the north of his little spread. Here he meant to hold up during the daylight hours that were soon to come on some high point where he could look down on his ranch house.

Beyond that he had no further plans. One thing had definitely been established. John Granville meant to wipe him out without a hearing or trial. The law had no part in this so far as Granville was concerned. The big cowman meant to do his own snake killing. Luck had favored Jim Parody this night. Next time Granville wouldn't fool around with a hanging. He and his men would shoot on sight and they would keep a sharp lookout at Parody's place.

The prospects were none too bright for Parody. He couldn't stay under cover all the time and rifles were far

reaching. He could go in and turn himself over to the sheriff for trial. But he knew there wasn't a jury in the country that would acquit him in the face of Granville and his charges.

Maybe he should accept Burley Meeks' offer and quit the country. It seemed the one way out. His thoughts shifted to Meeks and he wondered about the man. Why had Meeks turned him loose after coming to the Circle Slash with Granville and his crew, and pulling him into a trap? Had Granville in some way forced Meeks into making that play?

It was all a puzzle to Parody. He didn't know whether to look upon Meeks as an enemy or a friend. Another thing about the man that puzzled him was the offer he had made for the Circle Slash. It was almost what the ranch was worth. Meeks knew that if he sold at all it would be because he had to quit the country to save his skin. Under those conditions Meeks was in a position to drive a hard bargain, figuring that Parody would be glad to get almost anything for a ranch that was lost to him.

But instead of making use of this advantage Meeks had offered him a fair price. The man was either generous and a damned square friend or— And there Parody was stumped. He couldn't figure what other reasons Meeks might have for offering to buy his ranch at its true worth.

Daylight was streaking the sky when Parody pulled his tired body to the jagged crest of a rock-strewn ridge and took refuge under a shielding growth of manzanita. He lay there for a time relaxed until the heat of his exertion cooled and his wet clothes sent a chill running through his body.

He moved about restlessly then until the sun came. He crept out into the glare of it soaking up the warming rays. Drowsiness came and he slept.

WHEN he awoke it was with a start and a tingling in his veins that told him that danger lurked close. The sun was high in the sky, its burning glare scorching through his clothes which had long ago dried.

He sat up, looked around. Everything appeared the same as he had last seen it. Yet the air around him was charged with a stillness that was heavy with danger. Then he saw it, the half-hidden figure of Sheriff Bert Grimes, crouched down beside a manzanita a dozen feet up the ridge from where he sat.

A triumphant grin was on the sheriff's face. He balanced a six-shooter in his right hand, the round bore of the barrel trained on Parody's chest.

"You sleep like a babe, Parody," said Grimes in a voice that was taunting.

"I sleep like a fool," corrected Parody, anger over his own carelessness stirring him. He threw a glance around. "You alone?"

"There's a posse combing the hills for you," the sheriff told him. "I stumbled onto you a good ten minutes ago."

"You've got the waiting instincts of a cat, Grimes," grated Parody. "Well, what's it to be?"

"A legal hanging since you ran out on the party last night," answered Grimes callously. "You haven't got a chance, Parody. I've got evidence enough to swing you a couple of times. You must have hated Doug Tilden a heap to beat his head in thataway."

"You're the second man who's told me that," said Parody, his eyes narrowed against Grimes' face. "The only beating I did on Tilden was on his face and even that wasn't scarred much."

"Then how did the back of his head get bashed in?"

"That's what I'm wondering."

Grimes squinted at him. "Your handwriting on that note, isn't it?"

Parody nodded. "I wrote the note."

"It's evidence that will hang you."

"Suppose I tell you that Tilden was alive and in good health when he left my place?"

"Then I'll be forced to call you a liar."

"Others feel likewise, I reckon?"

"You got a look last night at how they feel," said Grimes dryly. He gestured with his gun barrel. "On your feet, Parody. We'll be going."

Parody's mind was working fast now. Once he was lodged behind jail bars he didn't have a chance and he knew it. As Grimes had pointed out, the evidence was too strong against him. If there was any break to be made it had to come now while he was still alone with the sheriff.

He weighed his chances and found them almost too thin for serious consideration. He had no gun. His carbine and Colt had both been taken from him last night. To attack Grimes barehanded would be the same as committing suicide. Still, a bullet would be better than a hang-rope. At least he could go down fighting, making the most of the slim chance he did have.

He came to his feet and then groaned and sagged. Grimes watched him warily, his gun held ready.

"No tricks, Parody," he warned softly.

"My feet," groaned Parody. "I damn near ruined them hiking up here in wet boots last night. They're swollen up till I can't walk."

Grimes eyed him suspiciously. "Then maybe you can crawl," he suggested. "You'll have to crawl for twenty-five or thirty yards. Damned if I'm going to pack you. Left my horse below here. Came up over the rocks on foot to get a look-see at the country."

PARODY moved toward the edge of the rocky crest, his face registering agony at every wobbly step. Watching him closely, Grimes fell in behind him, letting a half dozen feet separate them. Parody paused at the edge where the rock pitched down steep and broken for a distance of ten or twelve feet.

Grimes ordered him on and Parody turned to face the sheriff and let himself down over the rim feet first.

"Plenty of toe holds if you watch yourself," stated Grimes. "Take it easy. I'll be standing up here watching till you get down, so don't take any funny notions."

Halfway down Parody's foot tested a jagged point of rock. He felt it give and threw his weight on it. It crumbled loose as he hoped it would and pitched him straight down to where he piled up in a heap of sloughed off slabs below.

Grimes yelled a warning. Then, as Parody made no attempt to rise, he cursed him roundly. Parody gave him no heed. He was sitting there groaning, his left leg twisted beneath him. As Grimes watched he fell over on his right side and, with his left hand, slowly worked his leg out from under him.

Grimes was still cursing, firing questions at him. When Parody heeded neither curses nor questions Grimes started picking his way down from the rim, turning his head every few seconds to stare down at Parody. But Parody was paying no attention to the sheriff. From all indications he was badly hurt and was suffering the agonies of pain that twisted his face into lines of intense distress.

"Clumsy idiot," Grimes snarled at him when he reached his side. "I told you to be careful. What's the matter with you?"

"Knee," gasped Parody. "Wrenched it."

Grimes stared at him a moment, then squatted beside him, careful to keep his gun out of reach and trained on Parody's chest. He wasn't sure whether Parody was stalling or whether the man was actually hurt. He was taking no chances. Parody's left leg was still twisted, doubled up. Grimes caught hold of it, started to straighten it. A yell ripped from Parody's twisted lips.

Grimes was convinced then. He scowled darkly. His horse was still several yards below them. He didn't

know whether to pack Parody down to the horse or go down and try to bring the animal up here.

"Help me to my feet and let me lean on you and I'll make it the rest of the way down," Parody told him. "You can't get a horse up here very handy."

It was true enough. It would be difficult to bring the horse up in these rocks.

"All right," Grimes agreed. "But, remember—any funny moves and I'll load you up with lead!"

"What could I do with a crippled leg?" retorted Parody. "You've got to get me down to water where I can soak it, Grimes. This knee is killing me."

Parody was lying flat on his back now, his right leg stretched out and his left leg doubled back against his chest. He held it there with his two hands and worked his thumbs in a rolling motion along his knee.

Grimes bent over him, held out his left arm for Parody to take hold of so that he could be pulled to his feet. It was a mistake that Grimes should never have made. Of a sudden Parody's left leg unkinked and shot out to drive hard into Grimes' stomach. The wind went out of the sheriff in a whistling gasp and he doubled up.

Parody's body came up with the drive of his leg. His hands shot out, clamped on Grimes' gun and wrenched it from his hand. In the space of a few seconds the picture was changed around. Parody was on his feet holding the gun, and Grimes was on the ground hugging his stomach with both arms and gasping for breath.

It came to him finally and he let loose an oath as Parody fell on him, fouled his arms and started binding his hands with his neckerchief. With the sheriff's neck piece he gagged the man.

"Just so you won't do any yelling and get your posse swarming down here," Parody told him. "I'll leave your feet free, Grimes. You can walk out of here and keep going till you meet somebody."

Grimes glowered up at him, struggling to free his hands.

"It's nothing personal. I've got against you," Parody told him. "You just happened to blunder in and was threatening to get in the way of my plans. I'll borrow your gun and horse. I'll probably need them both."

He struck off down the slope, located Grimes' horse and crawled into the saddle. He wheeled the horse north with the ridge and disappeared in the brush.

CHAPTER III

COYOTE FRAMEUP

COUGAR HOLLOW was a rock-rimmed basin cupped in the broken hills that made a rough pattern across the extreme north end of Burley Meeks' range. Silvery shafts from the half moon slanted down on the ragged edges of the craterlike basin standing them out in bold relief.

Once the tawny, slinking cats had frequented these crags, but Burley Meeks' traps and high-powered rifle had thinned them out. Jim Parody came upon the basin at the south rim and drew in there. He slanted his gaze down along the narrow, twisting trail that descended to the bottom where better than two hundred acres of fertile land lay useless except for grazing.

Across from him slinking along the north rim a coyote stuck its nose in the air and yapped against the stillness of the night. Another joined it and for long seconds they yapped a chorus that might have come from a dozen throats.

Parody took the sheriff's gun from his holster. He opened the front of his shirt and stuffed it down inside, let-

ting the tension of his belt hold it flat against his stomach. Then, nudging the sheriff's horse, Parody went slowly down the trail.

He reached the bottom and sat his horse there for a full minute. Presently, he heard a stir off to his right and looked that way to see Burley Meeks emerge from behind a broken nest of rocks.

"Hello, Burley," he greeted, a note of relief touching his voice.

"Howdy, Jim," answered Meeks, coming close to him. "I didn't know whether you'd make it or not. There's a posse out beating these hills."

"I know," said Parody. "I saw the sheriff." He paused a moment and then told a bald-faced lie. "Grimes left his horse close to where I was hid out when he climbed that rocky ridge below your place to get a look at the country. I helped myself to the horse." He laughed shortly. "I reckon Grimes is cussing a horse that won't stand ground-tied."

Meeks' eyes ran over him. His gaze was penetrating, searching.

"You've got luck," he said dryly. "About last night—it was the only way I could play it, Jim. I knew Granville was going over there to string you up, and I knew you'd be damn fool enough to be there waiting for him. You wouldn't have had a chance, Jim, and I knew it. So I strung along, thinking maybe I could help you some way. I talked up the lynching to Granville. I told him you looked on me as a friend and I could pull you out of the house where they could get at you. You know the rest."

"Yeah, I know it," muttered Parody. "You had me fooled there for a few minutes, Burley. I thought you'd double-crossed me."

"You ought to know better than that. I didn't have any particular love for Doug Tilden."

"Reckon Granville is as sore as a boiled owl because I got away," said Parody.

"Sure. He blames me for that, but he can't pin it on me. There'll be no hanging next time, Jim. They'll shoot you on sight. You haven't got a chance in this country any more."

"That's the way I figure it. That's why I'm here. I hate to be a quitter, but I started more than I can handle when I knocked off Doug Tilden."

PARODY slid out of the saddle and dropped to the ground beside Meeks. He stepped out away from the horse and threw a racking glance around.

"You alone, Burley?"

The question seemed to startle Meeks. "Sure," he ejaculated. "Why do you ask that?"

"It doesn't feel right down in here," muttered Parody. "Let's get this business over with and I'll be on my way. I've got a long trip ahead of me before daylight."

"You sure have," agreed Meeks.

Was there a double meaning to those words? Parody wondered. There was an odd lift to Meeks' voice.

"I've got everything here," said Meeks. "I could raise only forty-five hundred. You can count it if you like."

He handed Parody two thick packets of currency. Parody turned the bills over in his hands, stared down at them and murmured:

"Your word is good enough for me, Burley."

"Here's the deed then," said Meeks and handed it to him.

Parody took it, squatted down and dropped the bills to the ground. He dug into his pocket for a match, lighted it and cupped the glow so that it fell on the deed.

He scanned it quickly and said: "Notice you've got two of your men signed on as witnesses, Burley."

"Want it all legal," answered Meeks. "Nobody has to know that they weren't here to witness the passing of money and the signing."

"Likewise notice it's dated a week ago," said Parody.

"Sure," said Meeks. "I have to live in this country after you're gone. You know how I stand where Betty Gran-

ville is concerned. I can't make an enemy out of her old man and hope to get anywhere with her. If I dated that deed today they'd know damn well I helped you get away. Granville wouldn't thank me for that. This way it proves that I bought your outfit a week ago—before you had this break with Granville. I can tell them that I wasn't supposed to take possession for a month or two yet. That'll explain why you were still on the place."

Parody gave a short laugh. "You figure all angles, don't you, Burley?"

"I don't think I've missed any," answered Meeks thoughtfully.

He reached into his shirt pocket and brought forth an indelible pencil which he handed to Parody.

"Couldn't fetch pen and ink very handy, but your signature with this will stand up all right."

Parody spread the deed on his knee and signed his name to it. He handed it back to Meeks with the pencil and gathered up the sheafs of bills. Straightening, he started stuffing them into the front of his shirt.

Meeks inspected the signature, folded the deed and put it into his pocket. He took a step backward then and was taking another when Parody looked up. Parody's right hand was still inside his shirt when he caught the expression on Meeks' face and froze in his tracks.

Meeks' right hand went down and came up cuddling a gun.

"Hold steady, Parody!"

Parody showed surprise. "What the hell—"

"I told you I'd figured all angles," said Meeks, his voice now openly gloating. "Do you think I'm crazy enough to give you over forty-five hundred good American dollars for that two-bit spread of yours?"

Parody stood there watching him. Presently a slow grin crawled across his lips.

"No, I didn't think you'd do that, Meeks," he said evenly. "It was what made me suspicious of you. The mistake I made was coming here without a gun. I've never trusted you. There's always been something about you I didn't like. I know now what it was. It's the skunk in you, Meeks."

"That makes us even," said Meeks, enjoying his moment. He was a braggart by nature. He couldn't help doing it now. "I'm a patient man, Parody. I've waited a long time to even up with you for crowding in here where you've never been wanted. Luck favored me yesterday when I met up with Doug Tilden's horse packing him home."

Parody's lips curled. "A man's pretty low who will beat the brains out of a man who is tied hand and foot, Meeks. But there isn't a name rotten enough for one who will do it and then brag about it."

"I wipe out men who crowd in on my territory," said Meeks callously.

THE man was confident, riding high on his gloating triumph. "You better start crawling, Parody. I like to see a snake squirm before I kill him."

"I reckon that's why you salted my springs," snarled Parody. "You wanted to see my cows squirm. I know now that it was you who did that, Meeks. Granville and his crew aren't that low-down. I guess you did a lot of other things that I gave the Triangle G credit for."

"I haven't been idle," jeered Meeks. "You're a blind fool, Parody. I've got a deed to your outfit and in a minute I'm going to get my money back by taking it off your dead carcass. You said you had a long trip ahead of you. You have. It's a trip you've never taken before and one you'll never come back from."

"You planned well," said Parody slowly. "But you made one mistake, Meeks. And one mistake is enough to wipe out all your plans. And yours are going to be wiped out!"

With the words he dragged at the gun that his right fist had settled on. One of the packet of bills that he had stuffed into his shirt caught at his

jerking hand, fouling his draw. Before he could clear the gun, Meeks' first bullet tore through his forearm. It bore a hole through his right side below the ribs.

Parody's knees sagged and he went to the ground fighting to drag his gun with a hand that had gone dead. Meeks' second bullet nicked his shoulder as he dropped beneath it. A third went high by a scant inch and kicked up dirt behind his flattened body.

Parody lay there waiting for the fourth which would snuff out his life. It never came. From off to the left of the trail two guns bellowed their death knell. As the bullets slammed into Meeks he stiffened, took two staggering steps and pitched to the ground, his body falling across Parody's legs.

Dazed, puzzled, and beginning to feel the burn of his wounds as that first numbness wore away, Parody lay there waiting, listening to the quick approach of running feet. A moment later John Granville and two of his hands were stooping beside him.

One of them pulled Meeks' body off his legs and dropped it again as if it was something too filthy to touch. Other hands caught hold of Parody and rolled him over on his back. Granville peered hard into his face.

"You bad hurt, Parody?"

There was genuine concern in the old cowman's voice.

"Nothing that I won't l i v e through," Parody told him. "He tried for my guts, but he shot wide and my arm took the worst jolt. How come you're here, Granville?"

"Guess you can thank Betty for that," said Granville. "We came here on a hunch mostly. It proved to be a good one. But you—you were a fool to come here without a gun, knowing what you did know about Meeks. We were bedded down off to the side here. We heard it all."

"I've got a gun," grumbled Parody. "But that damned money Meeks gave me fouled my draw. I should have left it in my holster, but I figured Meeks would make his play better if he thought I wasn't heeled. He did all right and the sidewinder nearly got me. He would have if it hadn't been for you. Another slug would have finished me."

HE saw Betty Granville then. She had lagged behind the others. Now she came close, dropped to her knees beside him and held his wounded arm. Granville took the hint from her and went to work helping her bandage Parody's wounds.

"Think you can ride?" he questioned when the task was finished.

"Sure," said Parody. "My arm got the worst jolt and I can put that in a sling."

"That hole in your side is more than a scratch," muttered Granville. "You'll start stiffening up pretty soon so we better get under way. You'll be down on your back for a few days, son."

"I'll make out," grunted Parody.

"You'll make out over at the Triangle G where I can look after you," stated Betty Granville, in a way that made Parody's pulse take a jump.

Later as they rode toward the Triangle G Parody voiced a question that he had been turning over in his mind.

"I still don't sabe what fetched you down into Cougar Hollow," he said.

"Meeks," answered Granville. "We followed him to the rim, then worked around to the west side and came down to the bottom on foot. We didn't know what was in the wind, but we knew there was something."

"I knew you didn't kill Doug Tilden," spoke up Betty Granville. "I told father that you weren't rotten enough or fool enough to murder a man like that and then pin a note on him admitting your guilt. There was something wrong there and I knew it. But I couldn't reason with father until after he went over to your place last night and you swore to him that you hadn't used anything but your fists on Doug."

"Meeks met Tilden on the trail to

the Triangle G," explained Parody. "I knew that. When your father told me that Tilden's head had been bashed in I knew Meeks must have done it, for I didn't. I wondered what Meeks' game was so I strung along with him to find out."

"Doug was suspicious of Meeks," said Betty. "He told me he suspected Meeks of a lot of things that you had been accused of. And he went over to your place yesterday to talk with you about it. There was no friendship between those two. When I decided that you didn't do that murder I looked around for somebody who might have, and everything pointed to Burley Meeks."

"We were in town today when Meeks came in to raise the money he gave you. Father was suspicious of Meeks by that time because he knew that Meeks had cut you loose last night. When Meeks left town just before dark we followed him. I'm glad we did."

"So am I," said Parody.

"There'll be no more trouble between your outfit and mine, Parody," said Granville. "I've been thinking about those Herefords of yours. I believe you've got the right idea there, son. When your young bulls get their growth I'll take them at your own price. My herd could stand some building up. Or, you might say they need building down. Less legs and more body."

"Herefords are the coming beef stock, Granville," predicted Parody.

"You're a comer likewise," said Granville. "If you need any backing, call on me. To me a man is either a friend or an enemy and I stick with my friends, Parody. Anything I've got is yours."

Parody shot a side glance at Betty Granville. For a moment their gaze locked and held. And somehow Parody knew that one day soon he would be asking John Granville for his daughter.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Red Seal Western, published Quarterly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1938

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Red Seal Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Periodical House, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th St., New York, N. Y.; Rose Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; C & A Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Ill.; E. L Angel, E. Campbell, Mount Morris, Ill.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

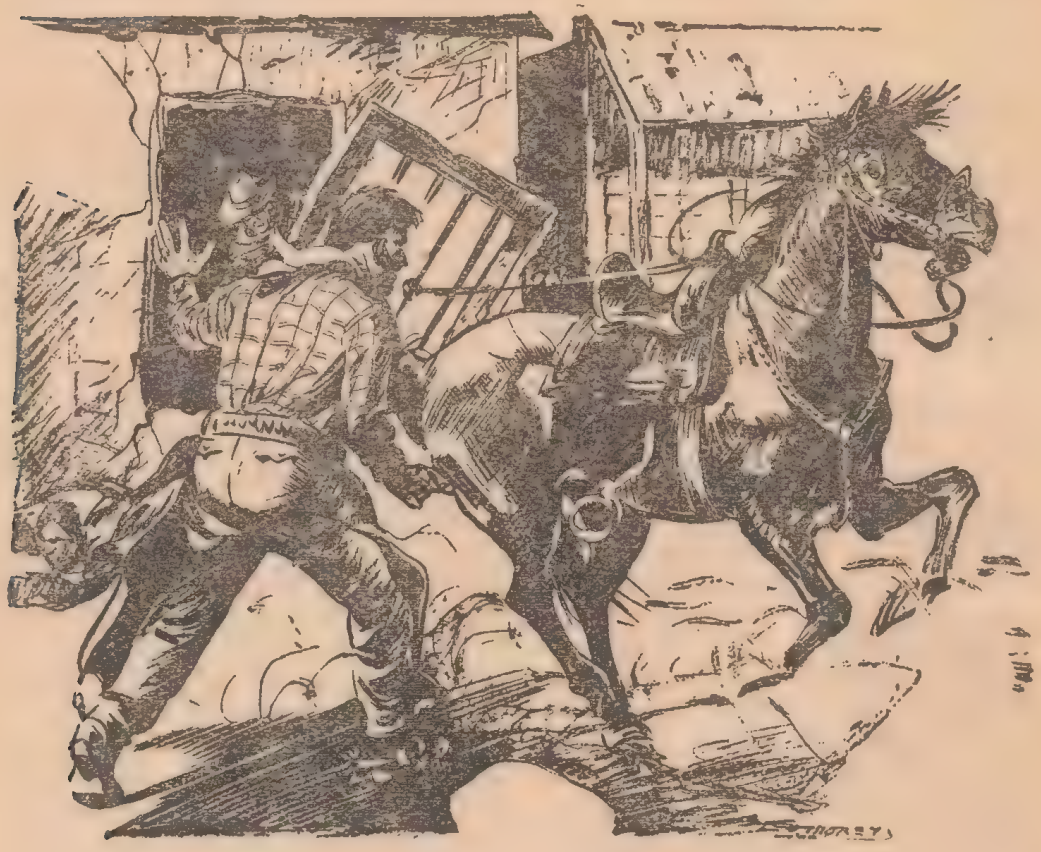
A. A. WYN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of September, 1938.

JOSEPH F. HUGHES,
Notary Public
Queens Co. Clk's No. 3297, Reg. No. 7862
N. Y. Co. Clk's No. 1067, Reg. No. 9H662
Commission expires March 30, 1939.

A vengeance vow to a dying man made a manhunter of a carefree kid. And he rode the halfway trail between the law and outlawry to blast the six-gun sanctuary of an . . . .

Owlhoot Haven



By Barry Cord

A FADED sign creaked dismally in a sandy wind: DRAKE'S TRADING POST. Just beyond the sagging rack a giant sahuaro cast its gaunt shadow against the long 'dobe building. Three slack-hipped animals nosed the short rail.

The stranger on the weary gray stud slid tawny eyes in cool survey over the desert outpost. He made little sound coming down the sandy trail. The habit was ingrained in him through hard experience. He was a lean, almost gangly figure, very dusty and beard stubbled. The marks of a long journey stamped him. And the marks of other things.

Things that were indicated in the cynical twist of hard lips, a cool mockery in his eyes, a recklessness to the jut of his strong jaw. Not out of keeping with the whole was the walnut-butted .44 thonged low on his hip.

Casually he slid his gaze over Drake's dirty window, over the heavy, closed door that was a barrier against the hot, sandy winds. Back of the long trading post the stranger glimpsed part of a long corral; cayuses crowding the bars.

A cold quirk drooped his lips. Years of trail-riding had packed things into the quick workings of his mind. He knew an owl-hoot stopover when he saw one.

His gaze shifted past the desert outpost, to the sandy water trickle that was rightly named the Meanderer. Beyond the desert stream, to the north, the flat sand-carved bulks of the Goliaths shouldered the hot blue sky.

The stranger shrugged powerful shoulders. "The end of the trail," he muttered noncommittally. A glint of steel appeared fleetingly in his tawny gaze, and stiffened his reckless jaw.

He came off saddle with balanced ease, dropped the reins over the pole rail. The first of the three wooden steps creaked as he put his one hundred and sixty pounds on it. But he stood like that—one foot on the sagging step, waiting.

The heavy door had squealed open almost at the same instant. A thick-shouldered figure bulged in the doorway. He started down immediately, scowling, blinking at the sun that glared into his face.

He was a big, heavy man, carrying a bulging gunny sack in his hand. A Dragoon butt peeked out of a rawhide-thonged holster. A checked shirt, green and gray and sweat-blotched, clung to his enormous torso. His legs seemed spindly in comparison. A red neckerchief around his thick, dirty neck matched the burnt redness of his flat, ugly face.

He came down fast, with deceiving lightness. His heavy shoulder jarred into the stranger. He jerked back then, as though seeing him for the first time. Small, greenish eyes slitted abruptly. An astonished oath ripped from his twisted mouth.

He snarled: "Stevens!" in a short, choppy warning to his companions at his back, just shoving out of Drake's. He let the grub bag fall. His right hand flicked gunward.

The stranger lunged forward. A queer, half crouching shift that was to stick unpleasantly in the memory of the checked hombre and his two companions. A .44 muzzle, backed by the full force of the stranger's muscled shoulders, jammed deep in to the big man's stomach.

CHECKED-SHIRT seemed to wrap himself around that gun. His ugly face went a dirty yellow, like the baked 'dobe of the owl-hoot trading station. His right hand fell away from his Dragoon. Yellow stubby teeth showed in terrible, pained grimace.

He said: "Ugh-gh—"

The stranger's left hand flicked around with reverse pivot of his powerful shoulders. A flat palm jarred into the man's face.

Checked-Shirt went sidewise, sprawled face down in the brown dust by the stairs. He stirred, clawed to his knees, groaned, and was sick with harsh, retching sounds.

The stranger shifted smoothly even as Checked-Shirt went sprawling. The same gun that had appeared so swiftly, forestalling Checked-Shirt's abrupt play, muzzled blackly up at two very astonished and rigid gentlemen. A bleak grin curled his slightly bitter mouth.

"You jaspers figgerin' to join this picnic?" he said, very coldly.

The hombre on the top step was a gawky sort, loose-limbed, deceivingly awkward. His body was stringy and hard as knit steel. A dusty blue neckerchief was wrapped around a bulging Adam's apple. Pale eyes were slits against a leathery, harsh face. A long scar crinkled the back of his right hand. The stranger could see it plainly because that hand had jerked across his waist in cross draw, and was now frozen on an ivory butt.

The other, slightly below the gawky man, was as tall, and younger by twenty years. A scar and a recklessness marred the cut of his long, heavy jaw. His eyes were close-set, beady, smoldering. Buck teeth showed through thin, murderous lips. He wore two fancy guns in ornamented holsters, and had the air of a man willing and eager to use them.

For long, taut seconds they looked into that rock-steady muzzle. It was the gawky gent who moved first, dropping his hand away from his weapon. His faded eyes muddied queerly under that cold, tawny stare. His mouth, a gash in his leathery face, moved to the forcing of words.

He said: "Hell, stranger—no need o' that a-tall." His gaze flicked over his very sick companion, and he shrugged narrow shoulders. "I reckon Kelly took yuh for someone else. Comin' out of Drake's sudden-like, into the sun—"

He shifted, awkwardly, his leathery face burning dully. A savage anger rolled up in him at the contemptuous quirk of the stranger's lips. In that flat, sun-blasted country under the Goliaths the name of "Cross" Morley generally struck terror into the hearts of honest men. That cross-draw holster gun rated notches.

But something about that lean youngster stopped him. A coldness and a readiness. Morley's pale eyes shifted over him, to the weary gray, the filled saddle bags, the blanket roll.

A man on a long trail, this stranger. A hard man, with a flow to his movements. One gun, and a trick of draw, and something in his eyes—something mocking and utterly assured.

A queer chill drew taut the skin behind Morley's prominent ears.

The stranger eased. His voice held a metallic pleasantness that grated. "Kelly's eyesight is plumb bad," he enlightened. "Likewise his judgment. Next time he'll lose both."

Blood burned red in the face of the long-jawed gunman near Morley. "Cholla" Evans had the lash of temper, a hot readiness to kill. "You were lucky, stranger," he sneered. "Next time, Kelly'll—"

The sudden bleakness of those tawny eyes clogged his throat. He went stiff, back arched, his mouth opening slightly.

The stranger's gun hand moved, slid the menacing .44 into its waiting holster. His right hand came up again, shoulder high, palm outward. A contemptuous grin slid across the bleakness of his face.

He said: "You want to try yore luck, Long Jaw?"

Cholla licked suddenly dry lips. Morley shrugged, his eyes muddy, slitted. He cut in: "Some other time, stranger." His left hand dropped to Cholla's shoulder, fingers digging deep. "Some other time."

The stranger watched them step down warily, move around to Kelly, now leaning weakly against the outpost wall. The big man's eyes were still glazed, sick. But a glimmer of his humiliation flickered in his green gaze.

He tried to shake off their supporting hands. His voice was a hoarse, ragged whisper. "You'll pay—for this—stranger—"

The lean youngster nodded. "Yeah—some other time."

He watched them get Kelly into the saddle of a mean-eyed sorrel. Watched them swing up beside him. They swung those cayuses around before riding away. Three hard faces were cold and stony in the sun glare. Kelly sagged weakly. But his eyes indicated plainly what it would have been an effort for him to say. Morley voiced the sentiment of all three.

"Get out of this country, kid—an' get out quick! They ain't room in it fer yuh!"

The stranger's bleak grin spread. He stood there, slouched. His right thumb hooked in his gunbelt, while

they wheeled their mounts, went pounding away toward the barren hills.

IT was cooler inside Drake's. Sunlight beat palely through the dirty window. The long room was crowded with a miscellany of groceries, miners' equipment and riding gear. Against the left windowless wall was a short, unvarnished pine bar.

Drake was behind the bar. His huge, grizzled figure was stiff against the liquor shelves. His big, hairy hands were hidden in the folds of a dirty towel. More than his hands bulged under the wet cloth. A black pad covered his eyeless left socket. His right eye glinted balefully at the stranger walking easily across the room. In the doorway of a room behind the bar a woman appeared. A slatternly, pouch-eyed woman with stringy, untidy hair, and suspicious, dull eyes.

The stranger's stride did not break under the warp of hostility that was naked in the atmosphere. He drew up to the bar, his gaze dropping carelessly to Drake's towel-hidden hands.

He said softly: "You won't need that gun, Drake. Put it away!"

A startled look drew itself across Drake's hairy face. The glint in his eye suddenly dulled. There was something in the stranger's gaze that did that to men, seemed to stiffen them, hold them.

Drake shrugged, pulled his hands out, slid the heavy Colt back onto the shelf below the counter.

"Gotta be careful, stranger," he rumbled in explanation. "One never knows what kind of men come ridin' out of the desert. Mebbe—"

The stranger hooked an elbow on the counter. "Rye," he said. "That bottle, right behind yuh!" He nodded as Drake turned, slid a glass up beside the bottle. "Some badmen up in these parts, eh? Like the three jest left here?"

A veil dropped over Drake's right eye, over his hairy face. "They didn't bother me," he rumbled. His voice was tight, caught somewhere in his thick neck. His eye dropped to the lean stranger's dusty shirt front. Very slowly he said: "Lawman?"

The stranger drank his whisky. The silence was quite strained. He could see the slatternly woman's fingers dig into the door casing.

"Never saw a badge I cared to wear," he said evenly. "Just a wanderin' son of the range who likes the warm trails an' the uncrowded parts. An' a curiosity." A pale flicker of steel drifted into his eyes. "Sorta got a name in my haid, an' can't get shuck of it. Mebbe you heard it afore yoreself. Ellison's the name—Hugh Ellison."

Drake stiffened. A marked harshness had crept into the drawling tone, the throb of a deep hate. And all at once the purpose of this cold, deadly youngster was revealed.

An edge of relief twisted the outpost man's lips. "Yeah—so I have, stranger. Queer hombre, this Ellison. Lives like a hermit up by Lobo Canyon." His eye dropped, pulled instinctively to the heavy gun on the stranger's hip. "Runs a few cows, an' tries to make a life with his wife an' a coupla kids. Figgerin' on droppin' in on him?"

A muscle twitched high up on the stranger's face. His voice was casual. "Yeah—I might at that."

"Due north, mebbe ten miles," the burly Drake answered. "You'll find his shack right at the head of the canyon."

The stranger nodded. He poured himself another shot, pushed the bottle toward Drake.

"Have one on me," he offered. He turned a little on his elbow, letting his gaze drift slowly over the room. There was something in his face then that told Drake of a long trail, long nights under the lonely stars.

"Got another name in my haid, Drake," the youngster said, turning. "Stevens is the handle—"

Drake's thick fingers jerked. Whisky spilled. His face raised swiftly, and then he gripped himself with an effort. "Stevens?" His right eye was masked again, blank. "Only Stevens on this side of the Goliaths is Deppity Rick Stevens, up in Jordan town."

The stranger shrugged. "Lawman, huh?" A strange, twisted grin crossed his brown face. The scene on the steps not fifteen minutes before slid through his head, Kelly's startled cry. He let it fade in his mind, for other than cinching his tabulation of those three hombres, it was unimportant. He, himself, had ridden the halfway trail between the law and outlawry too long.

Slowly he tipped the glass, let the fiery liquor trickle down his throat.

Across from him Drake lifted his, rumbled: "Happy huntin, stranger."

The dusty youngster tossed silver on the pine counter. "*Adios.*" He waved carelessly and went out.

THE sun lazed down the side of the sky. It paused on the broad shoulders of the Goliaths as if to stare wonderingly at the black smoke column that rose up out of that jumbled land.

From the screen of a dry wash a rider watched it, leaned forward in his worn saddle. Big, toil-roughened hands were flexed tight about a brass-sided carbine held ready across the saddle. That smoke smudge was a warning, pinching his leathery flesh folds at his eye corners. Lacing his bony shoulders.

He was lean and gaunt and haggard, this cowman who lived like a hermit among the catclaw and mesquite near Lobo Canyon. His face was a deep, leathery brown, roughened by the iron sproutings of a week-old beard. He looked older than his thirty five years. Much older. Gray tinged his temples. His mouth was bitterly hard.

His eyes gave Ellison away. Blue and restless and somber, they were the eyes of a man who hid away, but could never entirely rid himself of the knowledge that some day he would be found.

That smoke smudge had drawn him as he was cutting back from Two Spring Basin. Bigger it had been then, when he had first seen it. Now warning pricked the back of his neck as his gaze crawled slowly over the high, broken barrier backing the smoke smudge. He saw nothing in that slow scrutiny. But his mouth remained grim, and a coldness moved up in his wary eyes. His right leg moved. The spur touch sent his cayuse forward at a cautious walk.

They hunched up out of the sandy arroyo along which Ellison had ridden. Ahead of them the cacti-dotted land rose gradually for perhaps five hundred yards. Then beyond thickets of mesquite and greasewood, the earth humped up sheer to the bold tawny rock mass of the Barrier.

Ellison's gaze dropped to the slow curl of smoke over dying embers. A significantly still blob lay close to the deserted fire. Ellison knew, suddenly, that it was one of his cows. The grim lines deepened around his mouth. He rode slowly, his eyes wary, shuttling over and beyond the fire.

Silence. Heat waves simmered in their slow dance. The smoke plums drifted upward, unbent by any vagrant breeze, to fade against the paling sky.

For a month now Ellison had known his cows were being rustled. Tucked away here in the wild country under the Goliaths, it had been easy. Three men were doing the rustling, and they were no novices. Ellison had come upon their little campfires before, the embers already black and cold. Twice he had followed their tracks, and lost them in the slashed dry country beyond the Barrier.

There was something different, though, about this scene. Ellison felt a queer prickling at the back of his head as he dismounted. He swiveled

slowly, his gaze raking the dusky heights. He felt eyes watching, though he saw nothing. Cold eyes that impacted against his back.

The weight of the carbine seemed somehow futile in his hands. He turned, bending his gaze to the campfire. The steer was dead, a .30-30 Winchester slug between its eyes.

Ellison's gaze went over the boot marks about the fire, narrowed on the deeper cuts of iron-shod hoofs. A harsh premonition crawled across the iron of his features, curled his long fingers about the hot rifle butt.

One man, alone, had built that greasewood fire. Had intended it to be seen!

Flies rose in a swarm from the carcass as he turned to it. There were boot marks on the ground close to it, as though someone had squatted here in a painstaking task.

Ellison bent over the carcass. His long body seemed to freeze queerly, with spasmodic tightening. A grayness came into his face. His breath sucked in abruptly. He remained like that, unmoving, staring down at the markings on the flank of the dead steer.

A running iron had drawn its bold lines across Ellison's Circle E brand. Below the mutilated letters, burned deep in the hide, were strange symbols. Two crosses. And under them, a little to the right, a smaller mark. A star.

Behind Ellison, his cayuse snorted wearily. The sound seemed to break slowly into his awareness. He straightened unhurriedly, a smoldering black fire in his eyes. His gnarled hands were like vises on the scarred carbine.

His gaze quested that broken, towering Barrier. His voice was hoarse, breaking grimly in the drowsy silence.

"You're wrong, Star. I didn't cross yuh in that border deal. But yuh wouldn't 'a' believed—an' damn yuh to hell I'd never have run away if it wasn't for Madge an' the kids!"

The sun shone red in his lined, hard face. The shadows began to creep out over the barren land.

Eight years! They pressed on Ellison now, those futile years. Waiting—waiting. Those years had taken the bloom from Madge's cheeks, drooped the soft curve of her lips, dulled her eyes. Eight years, hiding away in the hills.

A strange, terrible laugh broke from his gray lips. What a fool he had been! Making Madge suffer, bringing the kids up like wild cubs.

Somehow the pressure that had weighed him those long years seemed lifted. Star had come, as he had known some day he would. The reckoning was due, and he would see it through.

He turned, a lightness in his walk. He swung aboard the chestnut, pulled it around. His right hand brushed down over a worn butt. And a slow grin formed on his lips. A queer, terrible quirk that was matched by something in his eyes.

It would hurt Madge, that grin. For Madge knew. She had known Ellison in the old days, when he had ridden with the Wild Bunch, a hard, hot-headed kid. And that twisted grin on Ellison's lips meant death.

DUSK settled softly, drawing its purple veil over the scarred land. High up on the Barrier a lean figure stirred, lowered battered army field glasses.

"Ellison!" The name was toneless on the man's lips. Toneless as the steel glint in his eyes. He stood long moments, staring west, where Ellison had faded. His boyish face was hard, old in its grimness.

He looked down, finally, at the rifle he had brought with him. Lean shoulders shrugged. He was glad he had not used it. Many things had been gathered along that long trail he had ridden; pot-shooting had not been included. He straightened, started to go back along the small ledge. Something caught his eye, down on the

levels. He twisted back, slid the glasses up again.

Riders were loping toward the dying fire. Three of them, big-hatted, wary. Recognition clicked in the lean youngster, and pulled a hard grin across his lips. His three playmates from Drake's Trading Post!

They pulled up mincing horses before the dead steer. After a moment in which they searched the surrounding country with hard eyes, the tall, gawky gent slid off saddle, knelt by the carcass. He stood some seconds studying the scene. His two companions slouched in saddle, rifles held easily in experienced hands, eyes roving restlessly.

Finally the gawky gent straightened, swung into leather. Through his glasses the stranger could see him gesture with his hands, emphasizing something he said. Then his arm waved in stiff sweep toward the shadowed bulk of the Barrier.

The three of them wheeled their cayuses, stared toward that crumbly wall. Then, without hurry, they loped north, toward the desert hills.

Jim Star remained on the small ledge till darkness settled thickly. Then he went down to his picketed gray. The late rising moon sliver found him in a hollow, close to a small spring. Sandstone cut off the northern sky.

A little wearily he made camp, quite cynically took his chances on a small fire. Over the flames he fried bacon, warmed beans, washed down the meal with gulps of strong black coffee.

The night wind carried a biting edge. Somewhere among the low hills a coyote barked. Close at hand, in the mesquite thicket looming dark beyond the flame flicker, a small animal rustled. The sounds seemed to accentuate the brooding loneliness.

Cross-legged, Star sat well back from the fire, a shadow among shadows. Habit had bred that caution in him. He held his long Colt in his lap, his fingers around the butt, and his broad, crumpled sombrero hid any telltale glint that might have reflected.

There was no tension in his body. He stared down at the flames, as he had stared countless times since the night his brother had died. He was not given much to imagination. But tonight he saw his brother's long-jawed, stubbled, wan face against the flame flicker. Saw the blood that stained a corner of his hard mouth.

"Get Ellison, kid—for me. Promise!" The words seemed to whisper, harshly, from the flames. "Hugh Ellison. He crossed me, kid. Got me cooped up in thet hell-hole. Seven months—" A short racking cough gushed up more blood. A sickness gripped at the youngster's stomach.

Hell, he'd been only eighteen then, seven years back. Just a kid. Footloose—hard, mebbe, but a kid. With but one thing in his life. His big brother, Tom. Big, swaggering, reckless Tom Star. An idol to the kid who saw him only at rare intervals when he came riding to the Hope ranch where young Star had grown up. The kid had no one else. He knew of his father and mother only from what Tom had told him. The Hopes had taken care of him since he could remember.

He never knew his brother was an outlaw—a killer wanted in a half dozen sections. How could he have known. To the lean, eager youngster Tom was everything he dreamed of being, a swashbuckling adventurer.

Young Jim left the Hopes at fifteen. He looked for his brother for three years. And in a border town he came on the first clue.

He had asked the usual questions, a tight-lipped kid with a gun on his hip he had learned to use. It was a cold-eyed, swart-faced man with bandy legs and two guns that drew him aside. Tom was in Mexico, jailed in some calaboose, after being caught hazing rustled stuff toward the line. Did the kid really want to help?

They went down together into Sonora, where the heat strikes harshly across the barren land. A squat, grim owl-hooter who had a habit of withdrawing a yellowed, well-creased reward poster from his pocket, and staring at the likeness of himself as the kid rustled wood for the fire. A grim man, who said nine words during the two-day ride into Mexico. Words in answer to the kid's insistent questions.

"We'll figger thet out when we get there, kid."

Things like that made Jim Star. Hard. Cold.

The squat man didn't believe in finesse. In that Mex town where Tom was jailed he loosened and gave the wide-eyed youngster orders. "Wait here. Get ready to ride like hell when yore brother shows up!"

The kid waited. Dim moonlight struck across the wide plaza. The squat man rode straight toward the jail. The guard before the door straightened, flipped his cigarette away. He said: "Who is it?" in Mexican. And died.

The squat man pouched his gun, and was out of leather with the shot still hammering the night. A doubled riata was twisted around the window bars. His big, powerful roan lunged forward at the slap of his hand. The window casement and part of the wall followed. The squat man yelled: "Tom!" A figure clawed in the opening, and the swarthy man's arms helped.

Then hell broke loose in the plaza. Guns spat. The squat man stood in the moonlight, emptying his guns, while Tom raced for town end and the lean kid that held rearing horses.

Guns hammered. The squat man went down reluctantly. He swayed on his knees, a ghastly grin touching his thick lips. His fingers dropped his hot gun, probed for that faded poster. His face had a strange sort of grim satisfaction as he sprawled down over it.

The kid had to help his staggering brother to saddle. They rode most of the night, and in the early morning campfire, before dawn tinged the sky, Tom died. The slug in his back had bled a lot. The kid buried him there, in the Sonora hills. With the corpse he buried something of himself. And seven years looking for a man changed entirely the eager boy who had grown up with the Hopes.

Seven years. Dim trails, hard towns, harder men. The long line of those bitter years marched against the flames. They faded slowly. And in their place he saw a gaunt man, stiffening over the carcass of a cow. Jim Star nodded coldly. It was the end of that long trail.

He turned in, well away from the dying fire, his gun close to his hand. He fell asleep at once. He didn't dream.

LATE morning found young Star circling to the north, veering in toward Lobo Canyon. The sun was hot over the brown, desolate land, distorting the humped hills.

The Meanderer twisted before him, a thin trickle over rounded stones and sand, sliding out of the brush-choked hills. Star let his gray drink. The sun burned a hole in his back.

He leaned over, intending to dismount. He reversed, instead. His right hand suddenly had a gun in it. For seven dragging seconds he stood like that, twisted toward the heavy fringe growth that hid the creek bend.

The arguing voices drew nearer. Star slid off saddle, pressed back against the gray's flank. The horse lifted a dripping muzzle from the stream. Star's left hand jerked out, clamped down, stifling the intended whinny. Muscles ridged his jaw.

Iron shod hoofs clanged on stone. Water splashed. Peering intently through the screening brush, Star made out parts of three riders pausing to water dusty animals. A tight grin jerked across his brown face.

It was Kelly again, and his two sidekicks.

The barrel-chested rustler's voice drifted downwind to Star. "I don't like it a-tall, Morley." His voice was heavy. "Mebbe thet cold-eyed jasper we run into at Drake's is gunnin' for Ellison. It musta been him thet built thet fire, an' ironed thet message on Ellison's cow. He looks jest like thet kind of a cold-blood pinwheel. But mebbe the hull thing is jest a plan. Mebbe Ellison finally called the sheriff into this, an' they sent this hombre to smoke us out. What the hell?" Kelly snapped. "He even looks like Depitty Stevens, don't he?"

"Shore," Morley, the gawky one, growled. "He looks like Stevens. But that kid ain't no lawman!" He shrugged, twisted his pale eyes over the broken country. "Jest the same, though, I don't like this any more'n you do, Kelly. We've got over fifty head of Ellison's stuff up in thet corral by Horseshoe Butt, an' if we move tonight we can round up the rest of the beeves he's got at Two Spring Basin. Once we get 'em movin' over the desert trail—" His shoulders shifted expressively.

"I shore hate to leave without gettin' another look at that pinwheel," Evans cut in viciously. His long-jawed face was sullen with remembrance. "He was too cussed shore of hisself, thet pilgrim."

"Forget it," Morley growled. "Both of yuh. We got a chance to have a hundred head movin' toward the line by tomorrer night. Tanglin' with thet bobcat won't get us anywhere. It'll mebbe get one of us a chunk of lead where it don't do any good. But jest to make shore, we'll cut back to Drake's, check up on thet hombre. If he's packin' a star, Drake'll know. But lawman or not, we're takin' the rest of Ellison's stuff tonight!"

He pulled up his cayuse's head, drew spurs across its flanks. His voice cracked back as his horse splashed ahead. "Let Ellison take care of that kid, Cholla—if he kin!"

Young Star waited till the sounds of their departure faded altogether. A grim smile edged his lips. So Ellison, the man he had come to kill, was being rustled clean. He shrugged, his eyes going bleak.

He swung the gray away from the stream. He, Star, had a bigger score to settle with Ellison. A score he would settle today.

The gray loped steadily, with unfaltering stride. Ahead of him, finally, the humped ground dropped. In the distance, huddled against red cliffs, he saw a shack, a long corral, and cottonwoods that were like painted things against the cliff backdrop.

He eased forward in saddle, his gaze thinning. His jaw ridged. Then, suddenly, he swiveled in stirrups as a rider came to view out on a small trail through huge gray rocks. A tall, gaunt figure, hunched a little over the horn.

Ahead of the loping grap a diamondback suddenly *whirr-rred* its deadly warning. The cayuse reared back in twisting pivot. And Star, caught off guard by the sudden move, felt his right foot slip through the stirrup as he fell.

He jerked desperately to free his foot. He landed on his left shoulder, and his head smacked hard on gravelly ground. The shock sent blackness rushing over him, and dimly, through the darkness, he seemed to hear the sharp spang of a rifle.

HE saw a yellow 'dobe ceiling the first time he opened his eyes. It blurred, even as he looked at it. A sledge pounded in his head. His left cheek was stiff. He could feel the long gash without touching it. His left shoulder felt broken.

His eyes closed, and he held an involuntary groan between his teeth. He heard someone move near him, and when he opened his eyes there was a woman bending over him. A wan-faced woman who might have been young looking and pretty but

for the premature lines in her face and the dull shadow in her eyes.

She smiled down at him vaguely, as though smiling was no longer natural. A man's face appeared beside hers, a gaunt, lean face and old crinkled eyes. Star stiffened, his face stony, his shoulders pressing against the bed. The blood pounded heavily in his head.

Ellison said: "Hello, son." Blue eyes slid over him. "Barrin' a headache an' a numb shoulder for mebbe a coupla days, you'll be all right. Madge'll take care of yuh."

Star lay quiet, keeping his eyes blank. A muscle twitched, unwilled, under his right eye. He could see his gun and belt, hung on the wall by the bed. He kept his gaze on the wall.

His voice was toneless as he asked: "What happened?"

Ellison shrugged. "A diamondback scared your cayuse. Yore foot caught in the stirrup when yuh fell. I was jest ridin' home when I saw it. I had to shoot your gray, son. It was the only way to stop him!" He shifted slowly, his blue eyes puckering at the corners. "Stranger to the Goliaths, son? Ridin' through?"

Star said slowly: "Yeah—ridin' through!" His lips were stiff. He didn't take his eyes from the wall.

Ellison leaned over, dropped a friendly hand to his good shoulder. "Well, rest easy, son. Yo're welcome to stay as long as yuh like." He straightened. The sun was slanting in through the window, spilling yellow across his face. He looked out over the rolling range, and something he seemed to see out there changed him, made his features granite.

Madge gripped his arm. There was fear in her eyes. "Don't go, Hugh. Don't—"

Ellison smiled grimly. His gaze dropped to the battered kid. He said: "I'm glad yo're here. I gotta ride up to Two Spring Basin, an' bring in what's left of my cows. Mebbe I—won't be ridin' back. Mebbe—if I don't—you could sorta see that Madge an' the kids get to Laredo. Madge's got folks there."

Little muscles faded in Star's cheeks. Unnoticed, his fingers tightened, crumpled up fistfuls of sheeting. But his voice was casual, cold. "Rustlers?"

Ellison shrugged. "A gent named Tom Star. I been hidin' out from him for eight years." His lips were grim. "He's out there, somewhere, waitin'—"

The blood pound in Star's head was heavy, steady. His lids dropped over the sudden glint in his eyes.

"That's a long time to look for a man," he muttered.

Ellison's hands were on his gun butts, and he was staring out the window. The reddening sun marked shadows in his gaunt face.

"He's that kind of a man, son. He hated me since the day I joined his owl-hoot outfit. He was an arrogant, blusterin' killer, kid—but he was hell with guns. I didn't know how he felt about Madge. I met her in Laredo after one of our raids across the line. I told Madge the next time I came to Laredo I'd marry her."

The room was quiet as he paused. Ellison's eyes were hard, peering back through the years. "The night we came up through Sonora with a lean bunch of brockle-faces, Tom knew. We had words. I could have killed him then. For eight years I been wishin' I had. I quit camp right after, an' near ran into a bunch of rurales, closin' in. They got Tom an' most of the boys that same night!"

Ellison turned away from the window, his face stony. "I heard after Tom thought I crossed him. But I had Madge to think of then, an' our first kid—"

The momentary silence was heavy, brooding.

Ellison's rough hand tilted up his wife's frightened face. "Madge—Madge," he chided softly. "Don't take it so. It had to be some day. The reckonin'. An' mebbe—" Something steely came into his eyes then, and his hand

quivered. Then he gripped himself, looked down at Star. "Take care of her, son."

His boots clumped hard as he crossed the room. He paused in the doorway. Star, twisting a little, saw him stoop, run his hand through the touseled hair of a brown-faced five year old boy, peering in the doorway. Ellison's hand shook.

He said huskily: "Take good care of yore big sister an' yore maw, Ted."

The silence hung. Madge was by the bed, staring toward the door. The pound of a horse beat heavily, faded. Still she stood, the lines in her face deep etched, her shoulders slumped. Little Ted came in to her, small hands gripping in her faded dress. Wide eyes stared at Jim.

From the kitchen light feet pattered. An older child, a girl, came to the bedroom to look silently within.

Jim Star lay staring at the wall. Words seemed to come pounding out of the long, dark years. "Get Ellison, kid—for me. Promise!"

His jaw ridged. A vein stood out near his temple. He rolled over stiffly, swung his legs over the bedside. The blood rushed up to his aching head. The room whirled, steadied under the harsh grip of his will. He bent over, got his feet into his boots.

Without looking at the grief-stricken woman, he asked: "Where is Two Spring Basin?"

Madge told him numbly, slowly. Then awareness rushed back to her, and she turned, anxiety flickering in her eyes. "You shouldn't try to get up yet—"

Something in his face stopped her. Unsteadily, his shoulders crimping tight against his ripped shirt, he crossed to the wall. His movements were deliberate as he tightened the black leather belt across a flat waist. He took out the walnut-butted .44, spun the cylinder, eased back the spiked hammer. His thumb slid down, paused over the rough star he had etched long years ago into the smooth butt.

Madge's eyes followed the movement. A gasp choked in her throat, as memory leaped the gap of eight years to another man she had known —a man with the same trick of etching a star in his deadly gun handles.

Jim Star shrugged, eased the gun back into its holster. Without a word he crossed the room. But he paused in the doorway to look back.

Madge stared at him from the center of the hot room. Little Ted stared with her, his brown eyes wide, uncomprehending.

Lines deepened in Madge Ellison's face. Hopeless lines. Her fingers twisted in her apron.

She said dully: "You're going? You're not waiting for Hugh?"

Jim Star said: "No. But I'll see him!"

He twisted away abruptly. His eyes raked the horses in the corral, picked out one—a big flame-colored stud with speed and power in its makeup.

Five minutes later he rode it away from the Ellison ranch. The sun was on the Goliaths again, a huge red eye looking down at him. Young Star did not look back. His jaw was set, and something inside him ridged muscles in his bronzed cheeks. Queer how he kept seeing the Hopes in his mind. Alice Hope, the girl he had grown up with. Pigtailed, freckled, laughing Alice Hope. She was grown up now. Maybe she was like Madge Ellison. Only younger, without the lines in her face.

Two Spring Basin loomed dark, like a black hole, rimmed on the north and west by frowning walls of sandstone. The stars gleamed palely in the moonless sky.

Guns were slamming heavily, continuously, when Jim Star pulled up the hard running stud. Two hundred yards north, under the cliff rim, flame licked and winked again and again. The walls tossed back the booming explosions, sent them rolling across the Basin.

Star leaned forward in saddle, his eyes wary. Understanding whipped

through him. "He musta run into Kelly an' his rustlin' sidekicks while they was roundin' up his beeves," he soliloquized coldly. "They got him cornered now, backed up against thet sandstone wall."

His gaze shifted, in swift appraisal of the dark stretch between him and the booming guns. A cold, queer smile touched his lips. He came off saddle in one twisting move, ground-reined the intelligent stud.

For a full half minute he stared toward that gunfight under the cliff wall. His face was stony, drawn under the white bandage around his head.

The long, dark years trooped before him—searching, questioning, looking for Hugh Ellison because of a promise he had made before a shifting fire deep in Sonora.

Seven years. It was a long time.

BACKED against a boulder, Kelly fumbled with his left hand for cartridges. The brass shells glittered in the starlight. In the wan light his face was a red, sticky mess from the long deep gash in his right cheek. He dabbed at it with a red, dirty neckerchief that should have given him blood poison, but didn't. His cursing was lurid, heartfelt.

Ten feet away, a vague crouched shadow behind another protecting boulder, Cholla squinted, holding his fire. Morley was in the deeper shadows to the left, circling, hoping for a clean shot at the cagey Ellison.

"Dam it to hell!" Kelly swore. "Thet ricochet near took my face off!"

Cholla shifted, his hot eyes stabbing toward his heavy-shouldered, cursing companion. "Quit yore squawkin', yuh wind belly!" he snarled viciously. "An' keep yore cutter spittin'. We gotta give Morley a chance to git close."

"To hell with Morley—an' yuh, too, Cholla," Kelly snapped angrily. The gash in his face hurt like hell, and his nerves were taut. "If it hadn't been for Cross an' yuh bankin' on thet pinwheel stranger gittin' Ellison we wouldn't 'a' been so damn careless rounding' up them beeves. Hell!" he snarled. "Lettin' Ellison ride in on us like thet—"

But Cholla wasn't listening. He had twisted away. His gun slammed shots into the darkness.

Kelly's swearing dropped to undertone. He shifted, peered around the boulder, heaved a slug in the general direction where he thought Ellison crouched.

The reply whined off the boulder in front of him, and whipped powdered rock into his bloody face. His swearing suddenly peaked up again, almost choking him with its intensity of feeling.

Behind him a voice said coldly: "Kelly!"

Something in that voice froze the squat rustler. His cursing choked off abruptly. He was hunkered down, his gun hand loose, his left hand dabbing the neckerchief at his face. Very slowly he turned, straightened.

In the half shadows not ten feet behind him, a lean figure slouched forward, waiting. Starlight touched softly a hard, rocky face, glinted from mocking eyes.

The cold voice said: "Well, Kelly?"

Kelly's huge shoulders were stiff, as though iron bands were tight about them. The weight of his Colt seemed to tip him a little to the right. His bloody face was shocked, ghastly in the pale star glow.

For ten long seconds he was a frozen statue. Then his body whipped into frenzied action. His gun arm swept up, his voice cracking desperately, heavily: "Cholla—look—"

A streak of flame from a magically appearing Colt lit up Star's hard face. Lead spun Kelly around like the cuff of a giant hand. Dropped him limply over the boulder he had been crouching behind.

Over on the left Cholla's lean, dark shadow jerked as the shot blasted. Hot eyes whipped to Kelly's sprawled form. "Kelly!" he rasped harshly.

Sinuously he paced toward his companion, his swearing a thin, venomous sound in the sudden, brooding silence.

He reached the sprawled form, bent over it. "Kelly!" he snapped. "He got yuh, Kel—"

Star's low voice stopped him, stiffened him as though it were a shot. Like a crouched wolf he hung, bent over Kelly, his six-gun lax in his fist. His long-jawed face was twisted, caught in the mold of a terrible surprise.

Then, very slowly, he faced around. The hot glint of murder pulled back into his beady eyes.

The stranger he had met at Drake's was slouched forward, his hand away from his holstered gun. The stranger's voice was hard, swift, as if knowledge of Morley's presence, somewhere near, disturbed him.

"You got yore chance now, Long Jaw. Even up an' the devil waitin' for the slowest man. Take it!"

Cholla took it, sweeping his fist up, pulling trigger in the fastest move of his life. The answering flame streaks slammed him back, battered him down. He tried to twist erect, his lips pulling back incredulously from buck teeth. The last slug from Star's .44 caught him between the eyes.

Star twisted away, lurching a little. His numbed left shoulder now had a long flesh rip across the upper muscles. Cholla had been faster than Kelly with a gun.

The silence under the cliff wall was heavy, ominous. The lean youngster whirled around, the soft scrape of leather warning, pulling a hard, cold smile across his face. From the deep gloom to the left a shadow moved.

A thin, high voice ripped: "Cholla! Kelly!" Then sight of the limp figures shocked Morley into sudden understanding. "What the hell."

Star twisted toward the gunman. His face was drawn, a pale blur in the starlight. The gawky killer was pacing forward, a gun glinting in his fist.

He stopped dead, his voice ripping: "You!" His gun lifted.

Star shifted, catlike, and threw his empty colt at the gawky rustler's face. Morley tossed up a fending arm. Lead ripped out at the plunging Star. He cursed thinly as he missed, shifted, swung his Colt around.

From the dark under the northern wall a gun blasted, and blasted again as Morley sagged. The gawky killer fell loosely, rolled over spasmodically.

He was dead when Star regained his feet and looked down at his contorted face. The youngster stood there, waiting, blood crawling down his shirt sleeve, dripping slowly through his fingers. He didn't turn as boots crunched behind him.

Ellison's hard voice said: "Hello, son!"

Young Star moved then. He found his Colt, picked it up. The long, blue steel barrel glittered faintly as he reloaded. He held it in his hand as he faced Ellison.

Starlight sifted down over them. Ellison limped a little. His right pants leg was bloody. His gaunt face had a strange, shocked look.

"You draw fast, son!" he muttered. "An' shoot straight. I owe yuh my life."

Star looked down at his gun. He seemed to see, instead, a long-jawed face, a flickering fire; to hear harsh, pounding words. But somehow the vision faded, and the Hopes appeared, the pigtailed features of the girl he had played with before the long, bitter years.

Slowly, that queer smile spreading across his lean face, he holstered his gun.

"I owed yuh mine," he said tonelessly. "This helps even it."

Ellison shifted. His face was haggard, drawn in the pale glow. Over them the vast silence brooded. "I was expectin' Star," he muttered grimly. "That was the main reason I came here. I wanted to meet him away from the ranch, face to face, if he had the guts." His shoulders slumped.

"He's out here somewhere, son—waitin' mebbe, for—"

"No," the youngster said. "Star is dead!"

He watched the rancher stiffen. Saw his face twist, his eyes glitter strangely. "Tom Star died in Sonora seven years ago. I came after yuh—to tell yuh!"

The silence was heavy. Ellison's breathing was harsh, quick, in it. "Then thet message ironed on the flank of thet steer—"

The kid shrugged wide shoulders. "I'm his brother—Jim Star!"

The stars blinked down over the scene. Aloof. Serene. The night wind moaned softly, rustled in Ellison's bared head. The long years were fading from Ellison's eyes, smoothing the grim lines in his face. The shadow that had lain across his life was gone. He and Madge could live like human beings.

Young Star's voice broke into the riot of his thoughts. "You'll find yore rustled stuff up in a corral by Horseshoe Butte. I heard Kelly an' his sidekicks mention it this mornin'." He shifted, extended a strong hand. "I borrowed a flame stud from yore corral, Ellison, to get here. I'm keepin' it. I'll send yuh money for it later." His eyes were clear. "Will yuh tell Madge an' the kids good-by for me, Ellison?"

Ellison's horny hand closed convulsively over Star's. "I'll tell 'em, son!" His voice was shaky, welling up out of a deep relief. He stood there watching the lean youngster fade into the dark. His lips moved slowly. "Good ridin', Star!"

Out on the sandy levels the flame stud pounded. Over the eastern hills a tipped moon pushed. Pale shafts came down to touch Star's face. There was a smile on his lips, a queer pounding in his heart. The long, weary trail was ended and somehow he felt free, strangely alive.

Ahead of him, on the moonlit levels, a face formed. A freckled, laughing, impish face framed in long, auburn pigtails.

He leaned forward over the stud's neck. "Git along, Firebrand," he muttered joyously. "We're goin' home!"

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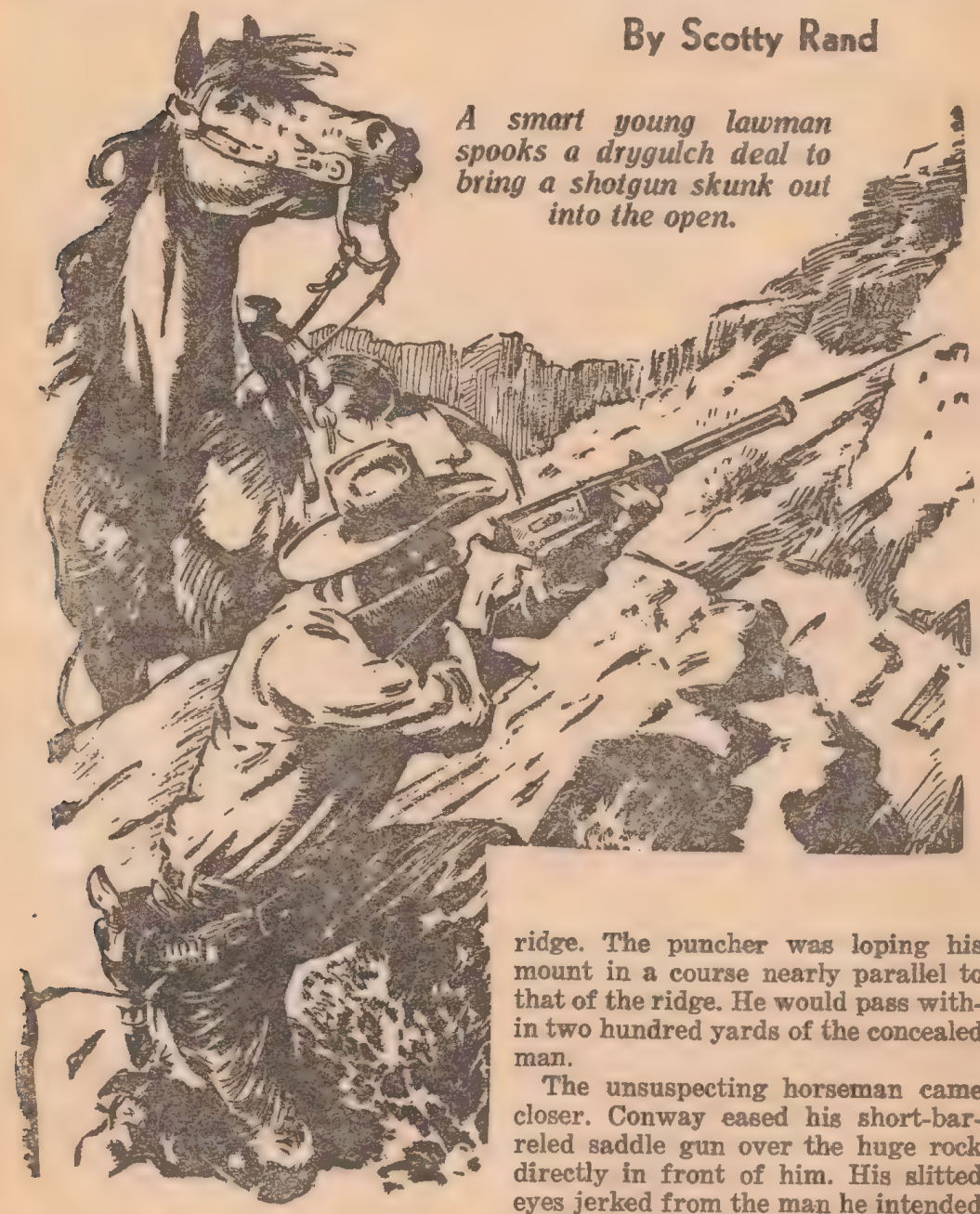
FOR GEM AND EVER READY RAZORS

Star Toter's Target

By Scotty Rand

A smart young lawman spooks a drygulch deal to bring a shotgun skunk out into the open.



WILLARD CONWAY'S beady, black eyes squinted into the glare of the setting sun as he watched the lone rider approaching his hiding place on the boulder-strewn ridge. The puncher was loping his mount in a course nearly parallel to that of the ridge. He would pass within two hundred yards of the concealed man.

The unsuspecting horseman came closer. Conway eased his short-barreled saddle gun over the huge rock directly in front of him. His slitted eyes jerked from the man he intended to kill to a small, scudding cloud that moved low in the western sky toward the face of the blinding sun. Should he wait until that cloud covered the sun? But by that time, the rider would be past him, and he would have to take

a chance on a longer shot. And the wind that was whipping across the flats would do things to a bullet from a carbine.

Deciding to take the shorter range, he cursed the blazing light that hampered his vision, and snapped the rifle to his heavy shoulder. It was plenty tough to hit a moving target at this range. And with that blasted sun in his eyes, it was nearly impossible. But that was a chance he would have to take, because if he missed and that rider got away after learning his identity—

He shook the thought from his mind and drew a careful bead. The front sight moved in a short arc as it followed the loping target. Conway's breath locked in his thick throat, and his finger curled on the trigger. The rifle cracked sharply, and gray, acrid smoke blossomed from the jagged rocks that hid the bushwhacker.

Bull's-eye! The killer mentally patted himself on his black-shirted back. The hapless rider's battered Stetson rolled with the wind, and he tumbled loosely into the sage. His spooked cayuse bolted madly off at an angle, and he lay motionless with his face in the choking dust of the prairie.

Was he dead? Conway was taking no chances. He carefully put three more slugs into the prostrate body. The d r i f t i n g cloud momentarily dimmed the sun, but the drygulcher had already turned to leave.

His dark, evil face was aglow with triumph beneath his black, wide-brimmed hat as he clambered hastily down the back side of the barren ridge. His only regret was that he had no opportunity to spurn the lifeless body with his booted foot.

That would be the last trouble he would have with old man Wally Hart! Hart, who had refused to sell his small but valuable Bar D holdings and had fought Conway's hired rustlers to the last ditch, was out of the way. He was so much buzzard bait now, and his never failing Sweet Springs was at the mercy of a smart man who always watched what he was about.

Why hadn't he plugged the old man long before this and got him out of the way? Well, he was out of the way now, for certain. And Conway's land-grabbing activities in the fertile Muddy Wells Basin would go forward like a stampeding dogie.

HIS hobbled, dun pony raised its head from its grazing and started slightly at his approach. But the animal stood quietly while Conway removed the rope from its legs and shoved his rifle into the scabbard on the saddle. Conway stuck his foot into the stirrup and swung up. His spurred heels raked the dun's sides, and he headed for his Slash S spread in a dead run.

He had to get off Hart's land as quickly as possible. Some stray ranny who knew him might happen along, and there would be hell to pay because it happened that the Muddy Wells' sheriff, "Hap" Hart, was Wally Hart's brother. That was what made this job so ticklish.

The sheriff hadn't investigated any other underhanded deals that Conway had pulled any too thoroughly because proof was hard to get. Besides, the Slash S owner was a power in the basin who controlled many votes besides having a band of hired killers at his back. Conway knew that the two Hart brothers had meant much to each other, and that the lawman would spare no effort to track down his elder kinsman's murderer.

However, Conway had planned this job very carefully. Instead of sending one of his hired gunslingers to send the old man to boot-hill as was his usual custom, he had pulled the whole thing by himself. Not even his most trusted hand was in on the secret. The Bar D owner's habits had been studied carefully from a distance, and the beady-eyed killer knew beforehand where and when to wipe him out.

A smile of self-praise split Conway's face as he kept in the draws

and low places. Darkness would soon close in, then he could hide his trail by cutting into his own herd's path and ease in at his ranch without notice. Not that it made much difference if one of his boys spotted him coming in. They wouldn't talk, but there was no sense in leaving a loophole anywhere if it could be avoided.

It was completely dark when he reined in behind his ranch house. There was a light in the bunkhouse, and sounds of singing and cursing floated out into the night. Conway dismounted, jerked the saddle and bridle off, and slapped his lathering mount on the rump. The dun wouldn't wander far, and the rancher was afraid that one of his waddies would spot him if he put the horse in the corral.

He eased in the back door, dumped the saddle in the hall, and clumped out the front toward the bunkhouse. The saddle could be slipped into the stall tomorrow when the boys were out on the range.

His big foreman rose up to meet him.

"Hyah, boss," he rumbled. "We was wonderin' where you was. Me and the boys just got in, and I was fixin' come up to the house and report."

"I've been off my feet all day, Rus," answered Conway. "Kinda laid around the house all day. I guess I dropped off to sleep. Say, how'd you and the boys make out today up on the north end? Have any trouble with that little 'deal' we planned?"

"Went off slick as a whistle," replied the tophand. He spat a stream of brown juice into the dart. "We got 'bout three hundred head of them H K steers and hid them in the badlands. Shorty and Dub are stayin' with the critters until we can git them outa the way."

"Good!" snapped the rancher. "That'll fix that H K bunch so's we can buy them out for a song. Well, you boys had better turn in; we got another little job on hand in the morning."

HE turned toward the house, but stopped abruptly. "Oh, by the way, Rus," he asked, "haven't seen the kid around, have you?"

"No. I ain't, boss," was his answer. "Guess he's in town galavantin' around."

"Uh-huh, guess so," mused Conway in a casual voice, but his swarthy brow was creased with worry. He always felt that way when the kid went off without letting him know. That motherless son of his occupied the only tender spot in his heart. Conway lived for the day when he owned the whole of the basin and could turn it over to his boy. Well, he'd probably show up in the morning with a hangover and a lot of excuses.

But the twenty-two year old boy did not show up the next morning. The Slash S crew left to handle the rustled stock, and the sun climbed high into a cloudless sky. Conway was restless with worry. He got his saddle out of the house and threw it on a mare. Then he hazed his loose dun into the corral. But his eyes kept searching the heat-ridden sage toward Muddy Wells. If anything had happened to his kid— Funny how a man as hard as he was could be so soft about some things.

By noon, the rancher decided to ride into town and see if he could find the kid. Just as he swung out of the corral, he spotted a cloud of dust; a lone rider coming from the direction of Muddy Wells. A breath of relief whistled through his teeth. Must be the boy coming in at last. Well, he'd get a good tongue lashing. Conway spurred his mount and rode out to meet him.

As the rider, coming at a slow lope, drew nearer, Conway saw that it was not his boy. The man was thick-bodied and carried a worn Colt at his hip. A nickel star on his breast flashed in the sun at each roll of his pony. Sheriff Hap Hart! The rancher had not expected the law to be nosing around quite so soon, but he met him with a poker face.

"Howdy, sheriff," he greeted cautiously as he searched the lawman's face. The badge-toter didn't seem to be upset about anything. Maybe he hadn't discovered his brother's sudden departure from this world. "What brings you out my way?"

"Thought I'd come out and have a little chat with you," answered Hart. His eyes worked nervously, and he seemed to be studying his weathered saddle horn intently. "Kinda hot, ain't it?"

Conway ignored the question. What was the matter with the fool? He acted like he was fixing to apologize for something. The pair rode up to the ranch house and dismounted.

"By the way, Hart," queried Conway, "didn't happen to see that kid of mine in town, did you? He's been out all night and I'm gettin' a little uneasy."

"That's what I rode out here about," said the sheriff, settling his heavy body on the steps and fishing out a sack of makin's. "Had a little bushwhackin' job over on my bud's place sometime yesterday. One of his punchers found the body 'bout eight this morning. He notified me, and me and a couple of the boys went out there. It had four chunks of thirty-thirty lead in it. Found the place where the killer waited on a ridge. Couple of butts and four empty shells. He musta—"

"Never mind about that," snapped Conway. "What about the kid?"

The lawman built his smoke slowly. He fished out a match, lit up, and inhaled deeply. For the first time since their meeting, he looked the rancher in the eyes.

"Conway," he said softly, "I'm afraid I've got some mighty bad news for you. Your kid was on the receiving end of them slugs. He's dead."

Conway's sun-bronzed face went pasty white, and the sheriff's face danced crazily before his eyes. His jaw sagged open slowly as he clutched the porch railing convulsively for support. What had he done? No, it couldn't be! What would the kid be doing on old Hart's spread? The sheriff was crazy!

"You seen him with your own eyes?" he croaked in a queer, tight voice. "With your own eyes?"

The sheriff nodded. "I'm afraid it's true, Conway."

THE Slash S owner wiped at the cold sweat on his face as if he were trying to brush away an invisible cobweb.

To gun down the only thing in the world that he cared for! He couldn't stand it!

He stared at the lawman with glazed eyes, and grabbed him by the shoulder with a grip that made the stocky Hart wince.

"It was the sun," he panted madly. "The sun was in my eyes. I couldn't see who I was shootin'!"

"You mean that you—" began the sheriff.

Conway babbled the whole story. The lawman was silent through it all. Only when the broken killer had finished did he speak.

"Well, feller, it looks like you put a hole in the wrong man," he said softly with a strange tone in his voice. "I guess this makes you eligible for a necktie party with all the trimmin's."

He reached out and flipped Conway's forty-five from its thonged-down holster. Then he took a scrap of paper and a stubby pencil from his pocket. A few seconds dragged by while he scratched laboriously.

"Here, Conway," he stated, handing the paper and pencil to the rancher who was staring blankly into the distance. "Here's a confession of the killin'. Sign it an' let's get going."

The murderer signed his name unconsciously, and the sheriff's handcuffs flashed in the midday sun.

Loafing cowboys stared curiously at the pair as they rode down Muddy Wells' dusty, heat-ridden main street and dismounted at the jail. The sheriff's mouth was in a tight, grim line as

he led Willard Conway into his office.

A still, sheeted figure lay on a cot in the corner. The killer stared.

"Is—is that him?" he asked.

Hart did not seem to hear the question. He pulled Conway's gun from the waistband of his levis and laid it on his battered desk. Conway spoke again.

"I'd like to see him, Hap."

"Set down, feller," said Hart softly. "I've got another shock for you." He raised his voice toward the door that led to the cells. "Bring in that kid, Red."

Conway heard the jingling of keys, the clang of a cell door, and a red-headed deputy came through the doorway leading young Conway! His kid! Alive and well!

"Surprised, Conway?" continued the lawman. "Kinda figured you would be. Yeah, he's alive all right, but my brother ain't!" He jerked the sheet from the body on the cot and revealed the dead face of his brother.

Conway tore his eyes from his kid and looked at the dead man. His mind raced in circles, then the truth flashed in his brain leaving him speechless.

"Yeah, your cub is alive," growled Hart. "I locked him up last night for gettin' drunk and raisin' hell. But I wish it had been him you drygulched like I told you, you filthy sidewinder, instead of pore Wally! I trailed your hoss tracks to where the dogies stomped them out, and I knew I couldn't prove nothin' because none of Wally's boys seen you on his spread. But when I rode back to town and remembered your whelp bein' in here all night, I got an idea."

Conway looked at his confiscated forty-five on the desk and measured the distance with his eye.

"Wally told me that he knew your outfit was rustlin' him blind an' tryin' to force him to sell out, yet we couldn't prove it. But your neck is as good as stretched right now because that confession you signed states that you killed Wally an' not your brat here!"

Conway leaped for his gun. He'd blast his way out of here! That smart badge-toter wasn't going to hang him! His clutching fingers closed over the Colt, and he swung it up and around. Then the whole world blew up in his face. A short, torturing flame seared its way through his brain, and swift blackness closed in on him forever.

Sheriff "Hap" Hart gazed through the swirling, powdersmoke at the bluish hole between Willard Conway's unfocused eyes. He slid his hot Colt slowly into its holster.

"I was kinda hopin' he'd try for that gun," he said softly. "I put it there a-purpose—I felt like I ought to do this executin' personal."

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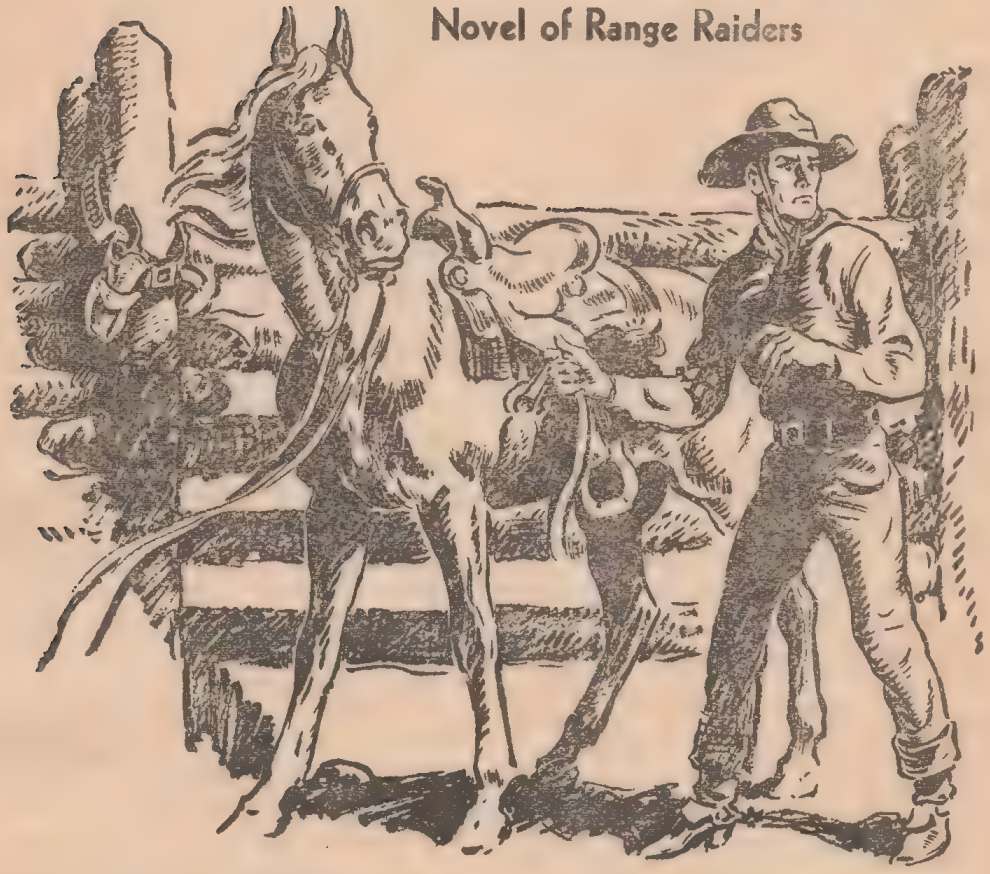


He was a man marked for a bullet exit—this young Polk Darleton who had shot down a lawman. So he became the Driftin' Kid, with the hue and cry of manhunters forever ringing in his ears. And to test his man-mettle he had to spring the treachery trap of a gun ghost.

CHAPTER I

Blood-Money Mission

THE sheriff's steel-bright eyes were suddenly murderous and his voice crackled: "You've fooled us a long time, Polk! This is the payoff!"

Polk Darleton, cowhand, standing opposite Sheriff Dal Kullen, with a blatting, hogtied calf on the ground between them, knew in a flash that the peace officer meant to kill him. Kullen had realized the danger of Polk's creating doubt of his honesty in the minds of Largo Valley cattlemen, if given the opportunity to talk at the county seat.

One instant Polk was weighing his chances of fogging a gun before Dal cut him down, for a crime he hadn't committed. The next, he had hurled

Legion

By J. Edward Leithead

His gun dangled from the rail, a long reach away.

himself to the right, a bouncing Colt in his hand. Kullen's bullet raked the cowboy's hip; then Kullen was folding at the knees. He didn't stir as Polk Darleton jumped toward his bay cow-horse, smoking gun still unleathered, and gained the saddle.

The puncher was looking back at the timbered hills, certain that the men in hiding there were Dal Kullen's companions, that they would break cover and be after him a-quirting. Polk roweled the bay and shot away eastward. He took that direction because it was only five miles to the Pima Mountains, where a man on the dodge would be safer than riding the open valley.

From the west came the drumfire of hoofs, the yells of blood-lusting men. It was the first time that Polk Darleton had heard the hue and cry of manhunters on his trail, and it chilled him for a moment. Then his blood took fire at the thought he was running from a bunch of calf-stealers, whose leader he had been justified in salting down. But who would believe him? Nobody, not even his boss, Tom Hindman, whose losses were making him suspicious of every cowpoke on his spread. Tom was a crusty proposition at best, and young Darleton had worked for him but a few months.

So, though he escaped the gun-flourishing riders tailing him, Polk couldn't go back and risk acceptance of his statements. The truth was too strange for an excited community to credit. Just a half hour earlier, from

the rim of the valley, he had seen thin smoke and six men at work, calf-branding out of season. When he had tried to creep in closer through screening brush, to identify them, his hidden horse had whinnied at being left alone. The startled brand-changers had hopped saddles, fled into the nearby hills. They hadn't waited to see that but one man was stalking them.

Polk thought that they were gone for good when he topped his mount and rode the rest of the way, to see what, if any, evidence had been left behind in their hurry. Several new-branded calves were bolting off through the brush, and Darleton dismounted to look at the heating-irons and one tied victim. It bore Tom Hindman's brand, as yet unaltered.

Then a horseman had come flogging over a sage-crested rise, and when he recognized Sheriff Dal Kullen, Polk wasn't as suspicious as he ought to have been. Not until the lawman cut short his explanation and jerked a gun, with the words:

"No use throwin' talk, Polk! Toss out your shootin'-iron!"

Stung to quick anger, Polk Darleton then noticed things about the sheriff that he hadn't before. Kullen was in his shirt sleeves, yet sweating more than a man should, just riding around, and he smelled of woodsmoke! Dal Kullen was somewhat of a dandy, and the absence of the frock coat he always wore, with flowered vest and striped pants, was most significant. Evidently he hadn't given much thought to his appearance when he circled back through the hills, so as to approach Polk Darleton from the south.

Polk sniffed loudly. "Been standin' near a fire recent, ain'tcha, sheriff? And you must feel half undressed. But a Prince Albert's too bindin' to brand calves in, I reckon!"

DAL KULLEN probably had intended haling Tom Hindman's cowboy into the county seat in "come-alongs," and building up a case against him to divert attention from the real thieves. The strained situation in Largo Valley required that a sop be thrown to the aroused cattlemen. Polk's keen-barbed observations, however, had made it clear to Kullen that a dead victim was the safest kind to offer. But the puncher had tripped his hammer first by a halved second.

Sheriff-killing was bad business, as Polk Darleton had ample time to reflect, after twisting Kullen's pals off his tail in the crooked canyons of the Pimas, aided by falling night. There'd be a head-bounty on him as soon as reward notices could be printed and circulated; sheriffs of other counties looking for him—and not only men who were star-badgers. The State of Arizona had become hostile ground, every sun-baked acre of it, and the embittered Darleton drifted toward the New Mexico border. Old Mexico might be a better choice, but it was too far from northeastern Arizona.

If he'd had any doubt the telegraph was working to head him off, it was dispelled as Polk stopped to water his horse in a ranch yard, after sixty miles on the run. He had meant to strike the outfit cook for a bite of grub, but a side-window of the ranch house was raised and he heard two men talking inside. They were discussing him in relation to a telegram received by the local sheriff at his headquarters in a nearby town.

"Sheriff told me," said one, not crediting the extreme keenness of the hunted cowboy's hearing, "to keep an eye peeled for this Largo Valley killer, as he was supposed to be headin' east and might try to lift a fresh hoss."

Said the other: "Feller yonder looks like he was watchin' his back trail. Let's go out and prod him a little."

But when the rancher and his foreman appeared in the doorway, guns buckled on, Polk Darleton was ahorse

and going fast. He sprayed the ground around the cowmen's feet with warning lead and was miles away before pursuit could be organized.

So they thought he'd lift a horse! Well, he hadn't and would not, unless someone shot the rangy bay out from under him. He had a natural hatred of horse thieves. He must look pretty tough, though, for those rangemen to spot him at once as a rider on the dodge.

It was nothing to wonder at. Days of almost constant riding, living off the country like an Indian, had gaunted him a heap. Loss of sleep had taken toll, also. And he had a jaw-growth of red stubble to match his carroty hair. But the greatest change was in the inner man, a hint of it mirrored in his brooding eyes.

By the time he had crossed the New Mexico border-line and penetrated a hundred miles into rich grazing country, Polk Darleton was ribbed up to any infraction of the law that would profit him. His status was the same as though he had killed an honest peace officer in the discharge of his duty, so why not have the game with the name? He and the bay were played out with running. Time to tie up somewhere.

It was in the Culebra River country, where, unknown to him, a war was brewing, that he racked the bay three nights later and stepped toward the light of a saloon. He had a few dollars that had stuck to his pocket from the last pay check, and nobody in this little shack town would have heard of the sheriff shooting in Arizona—not yet.

POLK slowed his step as he crossed from hitchrack to saloon, gaze bent curiously on a man riding in from the north, towing two horses. The led horses had riders, but they were not upright in saddles. Roped on, in fact. Dead. And presently the living rider checked rein by the saloon, hangers-on crowding around as he swung down. By the light flooding from doorway and windows, young Darleton sized up the newcomer as a hard citizen. Long, horselike face, steely eyes, and with holsters thonged to his lean thighs. There was a bloody bandage on one arm, a red furrow along his left cheek. Polk drew nearer.

"Looks like you had run intuh a drygulchin', Splinter," someone commented. "I take it you didn't smoke out Wash Magoon?"

Splinter eased himself of a hearty oath, jerking thumb at the two men hanging heads stirruped on horses fretting over their burdens.

"Magoon's still cumberin' the earth, blast him! A fine afternoon's work—for him. He cashed Zack and Pete, but let me fetch 'em away as a warnin' to the big bosses not to send no more gun-rasslers up his way. But, by dog, if I can scare up even one gun pal in this prairie-dog village, I'll go back tonight. 'Tain't only the money that's in it—I want to square the deal for my pards yonder!"

He pivoted slowly, his glittering eye shifting from face to face in the small gathering. They were not, Darleton thought, a tasty-looking lot. Barflies, a few who might work up courage to stab or shoot a man in a dark alley, a half-breed or two, one hangdog Mexican. "Splinter"—from his attenuated six-foot length, no doubt—was plainly a gun-chucker, but a timber wolf compared to which the rest of the flotsam were coyotes.

"What good's money if you don't live to blow it, Splinter?" retorted a bystander. "If you and your pards come a cropper, there ain't none of us in this man's town—"

"Man's town!" chopped in Splinter scornfully. "It's a scum-hole of alley-knifers, rummy bums and—" His glance was still roving and he cut himself short, boring Polk Darleton. "Well, here's a newcomer! Hello, Red! When did you blow in? And do you want to side me in a little

fracas up the Culebra? You look tough enough for this job."

Polk slid out of the crowd. "Who you gettin'?" He knew that this town must be pretty much as Splinter had described it, since killing and blood money were talked of openly.

"Rustler by the name of Wash Magoon. Some big cowmen want him rubbed out, and there'll be no tanglin' with the law afterward. You game, kid?"

"County got no sheriff?" Polk wanted to know.

"Sure. But the stock thieves elected him and he stands by 'em." chuckled Splinter.

That had a familiar sound to Polk Darleton—a sheriff who was a rustler or a protector of rustlers, running a county. He took a long breath and plunged. "What's in it for me?"

"One-third the price on Magoon's hide—two hundred iron men," replied Splinter quickly. "And you won't take much risk. I aim to trick the shootin' fool this time. We went about it the wrong way before, but that was Pete's fault."

"I'm your man," said Polk Darleton. Two hundred wasn't much, but it was something to a man who was broke or nearly so. A man who couldn't hire out to an honest cattleman and must herd with human wolves henceforth.

"I ain't been paid, nor do I get paid till Magoon is cold meat," the lathelike gunman pawed his shoulder. "My name's Splinter Lash. What's yours?"

Polk had already considered that. "The Driftin' Kid."

"Sounds ominous," grinned Splinter. "Zack and Pete won't mind waitin' while we slop a drink to our tie-up. C'mon!"

LATER, riding up the west fork of the Culebra with the loquacious Lash, Polk learned further details of the feud between cattlemen and stock raiders. It was a little different from any range war that Darleton had ever heard of, because, according to Lash, the thieves were safe from arrest and conviction on account of their voting power. They outnumbered honest rangemen and their employees ten to one.

"This Wash Magoon," said Splinter, "is headman of the rustlers, and some of the cattlemen figure if he's killed off, the trouble will stop. But I opine it'll take a heap of powder-burnin'. Fellows like you and me will draw gunnies' pay a long time, Kid, before it's settled."

"Looks so," agreed Polk, wondering whether he would have been so ready to accompany this notch cutter if the man marked for a bullet exit was not of the outlaw breed.

Splinter finally sheered off from the river. Two miles west of it he halted and swept an arm toward two roofs rising above a dark fringe of brush. "Wash Magoon's hangout," he said, and swung a leg to dismount. "We won't make the second mistake of tryin' to smoke him up in his house. It's like a fort."

Polk Darleton followed the gunman up a gully, skirting a spring which formed a star-mirroring pool about thirty yards from the ranch house door. Screened by the bordering brush, they hunkered on spur rowels and Lash spoke in guarded tone.

"Magoon's got two pistol-quick hombres helpin' him run his spread. But they was on herd duty this afternoon, and it ain't likely Wash'd look for a return visit so soon, call 'em here to stand guard. We've got to coax him out of his log shell, Kid. See that stable yonder? And the pay-pile beside it? All right. My idea is for you to slip over and touch off the hay.

"Looks like Wash is abed, but if the cracklin' of the flames don't wake him up, I'll bust a cartridge. When he sees the danger to his stable and the horses in it, he'll go hog-wild and charge out. Then I'll tunnel him. Easy, ain't it?"

Polk turned angry eyes on his companion. "Easy for you, layin' here in the brush, yeh. But I'd be a swell target while I tried to duck back to cover. What'd prevent Magoon from shootin' out that nigh house winder, where you couldn't draw bead on him?"

"He'll be so crazy mad he'll barge right intuh the open," Splinter said confidently. "And if you figure it's too long a hop from there to here, with the hay boomin', dodge around the stable wall."

It was increasingly plain to Polk Darleton that the gunfighter didn't expect him to live to collect any part of the blood money. Possibly Splinter intended gunning Polk himself, on the sly, if Magoon did not. Well, he'd show this killer he was dry behind the ears, and besides—

"It ain't only the risk to me," Polk snapped. "I won't have a hand in burnin' up no horses! You know damn well that stable will catch like tinder. And drillin' a man on his own doorstep from the brush ain't my notion of clean gunplay!"

In the star-shine, Lash's eyes gleamed savagely.

"Who said anything about clean gunplay? Lemme tell you, Kid, Magoon's the kind who'd do the same by you!"

"Only got your word for that," retorted Polk. "Way I'd handle it would be to camp here by the spring till mornin', and when Magoon come after water, give him an even break to toss his gun."

"And have his two riders to fight when they drift in for breakfast. Like hell! So you won't go through with it, Kid?"

"Not the way you plan it, I don't care what he is!"

Splinter was silent a long moment. He drew slowly erect, as though stretching cramped muscles. But one hand touched his boot-top on the way up, and suddenly he fell upon Polk with a flash of steel.

CHAPTER II

The Driftin' Kid

DISTRUST of his companion had put Darleton on guard, and the knife blade just slit his shirt as he jerked sideways. The sudden lunge overbalanced him and he struck on one shoulder in the moist earth by the spring. Luckily it was on his left side that he fell, bringing holstered gun on his right hip uppermost. Splinter's purpose had been to skewer him quietly, when it was evident his hastily chosen partner would be more of a hindrance than a help.

But Polk had hurled himself out of immediate reach, and, catching the swift motion of his gun-hand, Splinter flung the knife from where he stood, in the same instant grabbing his portside smoker. Whipped at a target but dimly seen, the bowie knife wasn't certain to stab Polk vitally, though it might disable him. No choice for Lash, then, but to fog a gun—and fog it first if he could!

A red spurt lanced upward, to meet the long flash traveling down. Splinter, with body half bent against the star-flecked sky, was vastly the better target than the grounded Polk. The breath chugged out of the gunman, a low wail escaped him, cut short as he dropped forward with his face in the mud.

Darleton carefully worked loose the knife point sheathed in the muscle in his left side. It wasn't much of a wound, though bleeding freely. Splinter had overtossed in his hot haste to wield knife and gun simultaneously. Polk scrambled up. That was that, but he'd have Wash Magoon on his neck shortly, because of the powder-burning.

Barely erect, he stiffened at the click of a lifting gun hammer in his rear and the words:

"Drop that smoker and turn slow!"

Nothing for it but to obey, unless he wanted a lead pill plowing up his kidneys. This was the hell-raising Magoon, of course. But when Polk faced about, arms cuddling ears, he couldn't make out much except that the rustler was tall and bearded, for black brush flanked his figure.

"So you fellows didn't get enough this afternoon, eh?" grated Magoon. "I sorta half expected you back. And like the wolves you are, you turn and fang each other. What about?"

"Aw, shoot and get it over with," growled Polk.

"Maybe I will—I'd oughta," returned the other. "But I never did get a kick out of leadin' up a man. I only kill when I'm put on."

Singular speech for a gun-bad rustler, thought Polk, and it had the ring of truth.

"If it'll do you any good to know" the cowboy said, "I couldn't agree to the other fellow's plan to blot you out."

"And how was that?"

Polk told him briefly.

Wash Magoon said nothing for several minutes. At last he spoke: "I didn't know it made any difference to you gun-notchers how you got a man. You must be a new breed. Walk over to the house. I want a look at you."

When they were inside the living room of the three-room ranch house and a lamp burning on the wall, Polk looked squarely at the man he had come to kill. He was approaching middle age, hair and beard just tinged with gray. Broad-faced, Indian-tanned, his gray eyes were piercing, but not the eyes of a killer. He hadn't the look of a man who rode furtive trail. In his turn, Magoon was appraising the muddy Darleton.

"If you shaved off that red fringe, I reckon half the toughness would go with it," Magoon remarked, a twinkle in his eye. "You're young to be a notch cutter. Just started?"

Polk nodded. "My first blood-money job. Met up with Splinter Lash in town tonight. He painted you black as hell, mister, but—"

"But since you've seen me, what?"

"I can't somehow believe it."

The gun that Wash had been holding on him slid into the holster on Wash's sagging belt.

"And it's my opine you're a kid who's got off on the wrong foot. What do you call yourself?"

Polk hesitated. "The Driftin' Kid."

WASH MAGOON shook his head. "Somethin' on your back trail that made you take such a handle and throw in with the likes of Splinter. Maybe it ain't so bad as you think. I'm not askin' your full confidence now, but this I'll say—I'm trustin' you and aim to be your friend. Know why? Because a fellow who won't bush up to kill a man and won't stand for burnin' good horseflesh is worthy of trust!"

Polk Darleton felt a lump jam his throat. He stared, his lips working, but not a sound could he utter.

Magoon's hand descended on his shoulder. "When you've slept on it, Kid, we'll talk about your future. One reason I'm mighty grateful you wasn't persuaded by Lash is that I've got a horse in my stable I wouldn't take any money for. Fastest thing on four legs, I opine. Show him to you later. Keep him stabled instead of in the corral, so's not to tempt horse thieves."

For the first time he noticed Polk's blood-smeared side. "Hullo, you didn't come off unskinned. Let's have a look at that."

Expertly the knife wound was washed and bandaged, and Polk departed, prey to many emotions, to bring up his horse and Splinter's. Turning them into the pole corral not far from the stable, he re-entered the house with a double load of rigging. He found Magoon in the kitchen, bacon frying in one pan while he sliced cold boiled potatoes into another.

"Scrape off the mud, Kid, and set,"

Magoon said. "You're pretty well ga'nted."

It was the last straw for Polk Darleton. He had come to help kill a man and was staying to accept that man's hospitality. What a double-tongued defamer Lash had been!

After he had eaten it was unnecessary for Polk to sleep over any decision to tell or not to tell of the dead man who haunted his back trail. He and Magoon talked far into the small hours, certain that no further attack would be made that night.

"You might be worse off, Polk," Wash said around the stem of his pipe, when the Arizona killing had been recounted. "What else could you do but shoot the double-dealer? Too bad your boss wouldn't stand by you, but you did right not to take the chance. If it'd been anybody but the sheriff, the last one folks would suspect of crookedness— I dunno for sure, but I think you'll be safe this far away. Anyhow, you've got a job on the W Bar M and the full backin' of its owner—if you want 'em."

"Do I?" Polk leaned over, hand extended. "You make me feel like small change, Mr. Magoon, but I aim to prove I'm worth takin' up with."

Magoon's grip nearly crushed Darleton's hand, strong as that hand was.

"Fine, Polk—or do you want to keep on callin' yourself the Driftin' Kid to outsiders, until we see how the wind blows from Arizona? Better, I reckon. We'll tie Splinter on his bronc, come mornin', head it down the river to Shacktown, and let them figure what they please about you. My enemies will send more gunnies, I expect."

"How's it goin' to end?" Polk asked, rolling his dozenth quirley.

"In a big fight, I'm afraid," Magoon replied. "Now, Splinter called me a rustler, a leader of 'em, didn't he? That's hogwash! The truth is I've been here as long as any cowman on the Culebra. Seven certain ranchers, who happen to have more cattle than the rest of us, ain't satisfied with their luck. They want to run things, they want more range and we won't sell, naturally.

"The small spreads have been increasin', also sod-busters have come in, reducin' the chances of them seven stockmen to extend their holdin's. They didn't want what they could get until too late, rather have the good ranch sites me and my neighbors own, savvy? Those last quarter-sections were only so-so for grazin'.

"All but one of the seven cowmen, Hank Starbuck, are a mean breed. But Hank plays their game because he's got a lot of cows. He hit the range earlier than the other six and was a good neighbor at one time. I ain't sure how far he'd go against us, but all the way, likely. And since all the newcomers in the past year or two have sided with us, the balance of votin' power is on our side.

"We elected most of our ticket last November, and the seven are honed to do somethin' desperate. I've organized my friends, told 'em not to sell or be bluffed. So, out of spite, the other side calls me boss of the rustlers and spends money to get me bucked down."

"And not a real rustler in the country, eh?" nodded Polk. "Why, that son-of-a-gun Lash told me—"

"I'm bound to admit, in all fairness," Magoon cut in, "that we've got a few shady citizens in our midst. The Ringdon brothers, for instance—four of 'em. I'm sure in my mind they steal beef, and it gives some color to the accusations of the cowmen that don't like us. Let 'em go after the Ringdons if they want. We'd not stop 'em. Them four are plenty careful to leave our cows alone because they live among us nesters, so-called. We don't want them, yet we can't run the Ringdons out on suspicion alone. But war is comin', Polk, and you'll be in it if you stay."

"Of course I'm stayin'," Darleton said quietly.

NEXT day Lash was started on his last ride to Shacktown, a limp figure bound to the saddle, and afterward Polk went out on the W Bar M range with Magoon. The latter forked the fine horse of which he had spoken. A palomino that, with two ordinary cow-horses, would have been sacrificed to the flames in all probability if Polk hadn't balked at firing that hay pile.

The golden stallion, obtained by Wash from a professional mustanger three months before, was such an animal as horse-lovers dream about but seldom see in the flesh. Darleton didn't wonder that its owner had kept it locked in the stable when he wasn't riding it on the range for exercise.

"Golden Streak," I calls him," Magoon said proudly, as they jogged along. "Lookit his lines—a racer's, ain't they? Yet he's got the stayin' power of a good cow-pony—can hold this Spanish trot all day. I dunno yet if I'm goin' to work cattle with him. You'll notice he ain't branded. Hate to mark up his gold hide, even with a hair-brand."

Polk enthused. His love of horses was deeply rooted.

"Yonder's the W Bar M's!" Magoon announced sometime later, sweeping a hand northward. "Keep 'em a bit close-herded, these days, not knowin' but that our enemies will send polecats like Lash to stampede 'em over a cutbank."

Polk Darleton eyed the distant groups of cattle.

"All this represents my little spot in the sun," Wash went on. "And I'm satisfied but for one thing—that my boy, Tom, ain't here to take over when I'm gone."

"Your boy?" repeated Polk, and wished he had let it ride. For a shadow of pain crossed Magoon's face.

"Yeh. He'd be thirty-odd. Had the itchin' foot, Tom did, and left for the Hardpan Gulch diggin's in Idaho more'n ten year ago. I was ranchin' in Nebraska then. Only heard from Tom once, that he'd struck pay dirt." He sighed heavily. "No tellin' what happened to him in that wild camp."

The rancher and Polk were still some distance from the nearest bunch of stock when two riders appeared on a hummock, Winchesters held athwart their forearms until they were sure of Magoon's identity. Bob Bender and Curly Dill, herders of the W Bar M, were taking no long chances these days. A little later Polk was being introduced. While Wash recounted the defeat of Lash and his gun pals, there was a rush of hoofs along a gully eastward. Four horsebackers topped out on the level a hundred yards away. The foremost rode with right arm flung upward in the peace sign, and Magoon growled into his beard:

"The Ringdons—Cal, Bill, Shack and Dave! What the hell they want? Looks like they're runnin' from trouble. That's a fresh bandage on Shacks arm."

Polk Darleton regarded the four with interest as they jogged forward, a shifty-eyed crew, lean but muscled like wildcats. Cal looked to be the oldest, with his stringy, dirty-gray hair falling on his shirt collar. He showed a row of yellow fangs that would have looked well in a wolf's mouth—he was supposed to be grinning.

"How, everybody?" he said, and his brothers wagged their heads in greeting.

"Don't let us stop you if you're in a hurry, Cal," remarked Wash.

"What makes you think we are?" Cal Ringdon still kept his lips skinned back, but his tone was less amiable.

The cowman pointed to Shack Ringdon's bandage. "Expect little brother scratched hisself on bob wire, heh? Or is it a bullet nick? I'd say you boys might've been raidin' up the river."

The eyes of all the Ringdon brothers turned frosty.

"Ain't sayin' we was, Wash," Cal replied. "But iffen so, Heck Price, Longley, Starbuck and them, with so many cows, wouldn't miss a little jag of 'em now and then. But you don't see no critters with us, do you?"

Magoon felt proddy that morning and spoke his mind more freely than usual. "Whoever you was tryin' to whittle probably drove you off. You Ringdons are one reason our enemies name us rustlers, by criminy! You call yourselves little stockmen and use honest neighbors for a front, and I don't like it a damn! I'll bet you never really paid cash money for a cow in your lives!"

IT was strong talk, stronger than any man could be expected to swallow with a grin—especially the Ringdon breed. Wash Magoon evidently held them in such large contempt that he was careless of the wicked flash in Cal Ringdon's eyes. The same was true of Wash's cowboys, accustomed to seeing the Ringdons riding range. But the newcomer to the Culebra, Polk Darleton, saw the rustler through different eyes.

Cal's right hand dipped, then swung up with a gleam of steel. The gun exploded—but it was flying down to smack the sod when flame jetted from the muzzle. Polk hunched in the saddle with smoking Colt bent on the eldest Ringdon, whom he had beaten to the trigger drag. And all four Ringdons were glaring at him, their animosity not unmixed with surprise at his flash draw. Blood dripped from Cal's wrist, where Polk's hot lead had crossed it, and the cow thief jerked off his bandanna to wrap up the hurt. The Winchesters of Bender and Dill were now supporting Darleton's steady-held six-shooter.

"Got yourself a bodyguard, Wash?" snarled Cal Ringdon. "Well, you might need him."

"Sounds like a threat!" barked Magoon.

"No," said Cal, not taking his greenish, baleful eyes from Polk. "But you run off at the head too dang much. When you spot a blotted brand in our herd will be time enough to call dirty names. Come on, boys. We ain't in favor this mornin'."

He slung his lean body far over the side of his horse, scooped up the gun he had dropped. And the four filed on westward, not looking back.

Magoon was muttering as he watched them: "I didn't think he'd have the guts, the snake-head! There'll be a reckonin' with them fellows some day. You saved me a creasin' or worse, Polk."

"Nothin' to it," Darleton sheathed his gun. "But I wouldn't trust that weasel-eyed push far as I could swing one of your brockle-faces by the hind end!"

He got on well with the W Bar M cowboys from the hour of their meeting. As peaceful days of herding succeeded one another, Polk lost his hunted look and the shadow of that sheriff killing grew dim. Not that the W Bar M relaxed its vigilance, for Magoon knew the war clouds hadn't dissipated. The seven stockmen were marking time or secretly planning a coup, he reasoned.

One day Polk was riding the palomino and trying out his paces by special permission of Wash, when, cresting a rise with the wind whistling in his ears, he nearly ran down a girl coming up the nether slope. He couldn't stop thundering Golden Streak or sheer off much. Their stirrup-leathers almost touched as the girl reined her horse at a tangent. Polk Darleton had lightning glimpse of the brown oval of her face, partly shaded by a black Stetson with white binding on the brim.

BY degrees he slowed the pounding palomino, wheeled and trotted back through the dust. The girl was waiting, her eyes angry. Easy to look at, thought Polk, and summoned a tentative smile as he pulled off his hat.

"This road," she began, before he could get a word out, "is plenty wide enough for two riders to pass without risk of a bad spill. I heard you coming, but reckoned you'd pull to the right!"

"Sorry, ma'am," Polk said. "Didn't hear you, account of the wind. I didn't mean to hog the trail, that's honest! But this horse was foaled from a thunderbolt and he's got a tough mouth."

She dropped blue-eyed gaze to the sweat-patched Golden Streak and some of the angry sparkle died. "You've got a real horse there, cowboy!"

"Yes'm." Polk was heartened by her glow of admiration. "Wish I owned him. He belongs to Mr. Magoon."

"Oh! You ride for Wash Magoon?"

Darleton nodded. There was an edge to her tone. Did it indicate unfriendliness to Wash, or just the last trace of anger towards himself? The cowboy didn't know.

"Well, I must be getting along." She lifted the reins, a shadowy smile on her lips. "I reckon you're forgiven since no bones were broken."

During the evening meal at W Bar M headquarters, Polk mentioned the incident, described the girl to Wash. But the cowman was burdened by more weighty matters and answered carelessly:

"Some nester's girl. Lot of 'em on this range, Polk, and in the natural course of things you'll go sparkin'. But, say, how did Golden Streak work out? How'd you like to ride him in a race?"

"There ain't his match in New Mexico, I'll bet!" grinned Polk. "But what race?"

Wash lighted his pipe. "I was down to Shacktown again today, tryin' to get a line on what our seven stockmen are cookin' up. It's no go. Either the barflies there don't know nothin' or they're keepin' shet while I'm around. But I did learn there's a rodeo and barbecue bein' held at the Diamond Tail next week. Heck Price's outfit, and he's the cussedest enemy we've got. No little cowman welcome, of course.

"Now, you ain't known to any of 'em. You ain't been off my range hardly. And there'll be talk, you bet, of what move they're plottin'. If you could manage to get an earful, our side can be prepared. It's bound to be somethin' dirty and maybe the sheriff can nip it at the start."

"I make entry as a stranger, eh? But how about Golden Streak?" Polk Darleton wasn't only willing, but eager.

"I could name the men who've seen him, all friends of mine. He's safe enough. Heck Price is gone on horse-racin', even built a mile track at Diamond Tail. So you'll have a chance to fetch a fat purse along with the low-down on the seven's doin's. Is it a go, Polk?"

Young Darleton shoved his hand across the table.

CHAPTER III

The Golden Stallion Runs

THE stands at Diamond Tail ranch around the oval racetrack were silent with tension. Past the quarter-post streamed quirting riders, and two horses, a palomino and a roan, led the field as they had from the crack of the starter's gun. Polk Darleton, entered as the Drifting Kid, with money advanced by Wash, had shed chaps and six-gun, was riding in his levis.

If any of the Shacktown loafers had been there—which they were not—none would have recognized in this clean-shaven youth, leaning into the dust churned up by roaring hoofs, the same red-whiskered fellow who had gone to the Culebra with Splinter, never to return. But as golden

stallion and roan breezed by the half-mile post, the latter beginning to lose ground, a girl in the stands turned excitedly to her companion, another cowman's daughter.

"I've seen that palomino and his rider before, Agnes!" exclaimed Nancy Starbuck, who had won the cowgirls' trick riding and roping contests earlier in the day. "And where do you think? On Wash Magoon's range!"

"Of all the nerve!" cried Agnes Price. "What's he here for, do you suppose?"

"Spyin', mebbeso," said a gruff voice, and a granite-faced cattleman in the row behind them leaned over. "You're sure, Nancy, that the fellow is Magoon's rider? If so—well, Wash wouldn't send a man over here just to win a little money."

"Of course I'm sure! He nearly ran me down on the road one day."

But Nancy didn't feel quite comfortable after making the assertion. Heck Price, host to her and her father and the Starbuck cowhands, had risen and was making his way out of the stands.

"I wonder what they'll do to him?" Nancy said nervously, her gaze fastened to the flying riders, now almost hidden by a film of dust. Flashing alone down the home stretch, golden hide gleaming in the sun, came Golden Streak. The spectators were on their feet, yelling appreciation of the stirring finish.

Polk Darleton had received the gold-chinking purse at the judges' stand and ridden off the field before Heck Price arrived with word that he was from Magoon's outfit. He was at the corrals, lifting the saddle from Golden Streak, his gun and chaps still hanging on the fence, when a party of grim-faced men stepped up from behind.

So many were going to and from the round pens that Polk hadn't noticed this group following him after he left the racetrack. He had spent the morning circulating among the riders of seven outfits gathered there, but so far no mention had been made of any planned action against Magoon's "cow thieves." There was still plenty of time to learn something, and no one seemed to question his presence there.

"Put 'em up!" barked a voice as he swung his saddle to the top rail.

Polk's heart seemed to stop pumping as he spun about. Heck Price was glaring at him ferociously, flanking a six-shooter. The others looked equally hostile.

"WASH MAGOON sent you over here to snoop on us, didn't he?" grated Price, the Diamond Tail owner. A sandy-mustached man near him was Hank Starbuck, Nancy's father, but this Polk did not know.

Darleton hesitated, eyed his gun which dangled temptingly from the rail, but a long reach away. The bridle was still on Golden Streak and Polk could ride him slick. But the cattlemen blocked the gateway, and it was doubtful if the palomino could get enough of a running start to leap the high corral fence.

"What d'you mean—snoop? You hombres must have guilty consciences." Polk played for time. He hadn't raised his hands.

"Actin' dumb won't help you, Driftin' Kid!" rapped Price. "Cuddle your ears or—"

Recklessly Polk executed a catlike leap. Price's gun smoked, the bullet driving past one shoulder as Polk hauled his own smoker from the dangling holster. Half squatting, he swung on Heck Price, just as a pale-lipped girl wormed her way to the front. She jogged Price's elbow so that his second shot missed Polk more widely than the first. The cowboy's thumb was bent to rock his hammer prong, but the closeness of the girl to the hulking Price caused it to unbend. Polk recognized her in astonishment. Then his gaze narrowed.

"So it was you tipped 'em off?" he growled. "I thought you were—"

She tossed her head. "Why not? I'm Hank Starbuck's daughter— Mr. Price is our friend!" She added in less defiant tone: "But I don't want to see you killed!"

"You keep out of this missy!" grated Price, seizing her by the shoulder to push her aside. "Here, Hank, grab her!"

Polk thought he had a slim chance and took it. He darted toward the palomino. But the hope of flinging astride and testing Golden Streak's jumping qualities was short-lived. A cowboy, rope in hand, had approached the west side of the corral, and, unnoticed by Polk, swung to the top rail. A short loop flipped out toward the fugitive, down over head and shoulders, and tightened with overbalancing violence. Polk spilled on his side in the corral dust. But he lashed out with spurred heels, his face red with fighting frenzy, when the cowmen rushed him.

Two of them jumped, cursing, out of range of the slashing spurs. But Heck Price ended his resistance by dodging in where Polk couldn't see him and crashing steel on his hatless head. When Polk was next conscious of his surroundings, he lay in total darkneses, roped down. His head felt as though it would split open, and blood trickling from the scalp-wound had dried on one side of his face. He listened to the restless shifting of booted feet near at hand, realized the sound was made by a guard outside the door of his prison doom.

"Well, they got me," Polk Darleton bitterly reflected. "But where the hell am I?"

A light step approached the door and a feminine voice addressed the watcher, little above a whisper.

"If old Heck found it out," replied the man's voice, "I'd catch hell."

"He won't, if you let me in quick." It was Nancy Starbuck speaking, and Polk judged he was in the Diamond Tail ranch house, not one of the outbuildings. She probably knew Price's cowhands as well as her father's.

THE door was unlocked, and a lamp in the girl's hand cut the room's blackness. Still wearing her half-boots, Nancy approached the iron bedstead where Polk lay spread-eagled. As their eyes met, the prisoner's lip curled a trifle.

"I wish there was something I could do—Kid." She used the only name she knew him by, and plainly his plight distressed her.

"Looks like you'd done enough," was his grim retort.

"I mean—help you. But there doesn't seem to be any way. I'll never forgive myself if—"

"Nothin' to forgive on either side," he interrupted. "These are your people, and naturally you play their game. That's all right—no kick comin' from me."

"Miss Starbuck!" whispered the guard, bulking in the doorway. It was a warning, evidently, for the girl swept out of the room and the door was hurriedly locked.

The sound of her tapping boot heels barely had died away before men entered the hallway. They were coming, Polk judged, from the direction of the front yard. Quite a bunch of them, by the continuous clack and clink of peg heels dragging spur chains.

Heck Price was saying to someone: "Have any trouble gettin' off at the flag station? We couldn't take a chance on your gettin' off at the county seat. The rustlers are in control there, sheriff and all. And a hundred strangers droppin' into town would attract too much attention. We're movin' into the rustler country before midnight, and you fellows will fork the same horses you rode over from the station. In here, boys." A door creaked along the hall. "Livin' room's big enough to pack us all in, to discuss details of the campaign.

"We'll clean up every thief outfit,

shoot the sheriff if he interferes. But to keep anybody who escapes from swearin' to our identity in court afterward, all of us are wearin' hoods—night-rider rigs. I've had over two hundred of 'em made out of flour sackin', right here at the ranch, because I and my neighbors and their cowboys are goin' along." He talked while the tramp of feet continued, apparently standing beside the open door while the new arrivals entered.

Polk Darleton strained vigorously at the ropes lashing him to the bedframe. Then he lay back panting, listening to the scuff of boots marching into that room across the hall. What chance had he of carrying warning to Magoon and his nester neighbors of the threatened offensive? Wash had shrewdly guessed that the Diamond Tail rodeo and barbecue were but a blind to cover up the gathering of the seven outfits for a decisive stroke at unwanted neighbors. Polk understood well enough that the "hundred strangers" were gun-notchers hired by emissaries of the seven stockmen during past peaceful weeks.

It was land piracy on a large scale, with a good chance of success. Should any nesters on the Culebra Range escape this hair-trigger legion, a court conviction would require positive identification of the raiders. And the night-riders' hoods would prevent that! Afterward, when the smoke had cleared, the victorious stockmen could parcel out those choice grazing acres among themselves.

The thudding of boots ceased, a door slammed, and after that only a subdued rumble of voices reached Polk Darleton. Savagely he renewed his futile writhing and was batched in sweat when the door across the hall reopened and someone called to Polk's guard:

"Fetch that Kid in here!"

WHEN the cowboy was led, arms tied behind, into the big, lamplighted living room, he blinked in the sudden glare. The features of the men crowded together, most of them standing, were at first a meaningless blur, partly due to the haze of tobacco smoke. Besides the hundred agate-eyed strangers, all the ranch owners and many of their hands were present.

Polk focused his gaze on Heck Price, at the head of a table, when the latter rustled a newspaper and spoke raspingly:

"Boys, here's a damn spy we caught today, a fellow who's been ridin' for this Wash Magoon, leader of the rustlers. He calls himself the Driftin' Kid. After we trapped him I began thinkin' I'd seen somewhere a description of a wanted killer that would fit this redheaded Kid. Here it is, a little item in last month's issue of the Gunsight *Bugle* that was knockin' round the house. Listen!"

Price read the brief notice that Sheriff Dal Kullen, of Geronimo County Arizona, had been severely wounded while attempting the arrest of a cattle thief, one Polk Darleton, about twenty-four years of age, who had long been an unsuspected rustler in Largo Valley. Darleton had headed toward the New Mexico border, and a substantial reward would be posted if, as was expected, the sheriff died. Then followed the description that could mean no other than the slim-flanked cowpuncher facing that roomful of killers and would-be killers.

Polk was amazed to hear he hadn't left Kullen dead as a stone when he fled; but doubtless the sheriff had passed out later. With a frozen face, but inwardly a mixture of emotions as the ghost of Dal Kullen menaced him from afar, Polk heard Price's question in a daze:

"What you got to say, Darleton?"

Polk answered, his voice seeming to come from outside himself, as though lips other than his own framed the words:

"Kullen himself was the cow thief—he aimed to frame me!"

"Very likely!" sneered Heck Price. "You see, boys, what kind of trash

Magoon is harborin'. We're takin' this Darleton with us tonight, he might come handy as a hostage. If we don't need him for that, he's probably worth money on the hoof by this time in Arizona. So handle him a mite careful. Here, Dixon, you're gun boss —take charge of him. And let's get goin'!"

From the moment that Polk had been shoved into the living room by his guard, tension had gripped a certain unkempt individual leaning against the wall, hips weighted by black-stocked. 45's. He listened to the reading of the newspaper item with lips a thin, grim line under brown mustache and beard. So heavily was he whiskered that little of his features were revealed except steel-bright eyes and aquiline nose. He was dressed more like a range tramp than most of the gunfighters. Nobody who had known him as the dandified sheriff of Geronimo County would have recognized in the seedy, whiskered man—Dal Kullen!

He filed out with the others to the ranch yard, plucking thoughtfully at the unaccustomed beard. Who'd have thought he would cross the trail of Polk Darleton again, and above all—Wash Magoon! Mention of Wash by Heck Price had given Dal his first jolt, before Polk was led in. They said Wash was a rustler, but that was a lie! The old man had always been straightest of the straight.

When Kullen climbed into a strange saddle on a strange horse and found Polk backing another bronc near him, in charge of cold-eyed "Whang" Dixon, a gunny who boasted fourteen notches, the ex-sheriff couldn't keep his glance from straying to the cowboy. Darleton, arms still tied, but legs free, grew conscious of the other's stare. But no sign of recognition lighted Polk's eyes. He wouldn't have known Dal in broad daylight, not in that disreputable rig and with all those whiskers.

There was a wait that seemed to Polk interminable. He forgot the gunman who seemed strangely interested in him when the cavalcade moved out of the Diamond Tail, a hundred gunmen and as many more cattlemen and cowboys. None had as yet donned the handmade hoods of flour sacking. But an hour's ride separated them from the range of the nesters, and it was a bad moment for Polk Parleton. If he could have escaped, mounted on the fleet Golden Streak, the nesters, many of them, might have been aroused in time to defend themselves. And the first outfit in the path of the hair-trigger legion was the W Bar M!

Suddenly Polk was aware that a horseman had pulled alongside him on the left and was prodding his leg. On the other side rode grim Whang Dixon, who apparently gave no heed. The three were a little in advance of the riders strung backward for a quarter of a mile.

The moon, intermittently masked by scudding clouds, struck silvery beams downward at the moment Polk's attention was drawn to that insistent knee pressure from the left side. The rider was one he didn't recall to have seen before, wearing an ill-fitting buckskin jumper. But with a start he recognized the horse the other bestrode, the shining golden coat of the Streak. In the same instant the rider's head tilted back, and from beneath wide hat-brim Nancy Starbuck's eyes sought his with feverish intensity!

CHAPTER IV

Gun-Mad Nesters

POLK DARLETON needed not to be told that Nancy's presence astride the palomino spelled aid to a getaway. She was proving that her desire to help him, expressed earlier that evening, had not been idle talk.

The cowboy understood what he was expected to do, turned slightly sideways in the saddle as he caught the glint of a knife in her hand.

The girl waited for the moon to pass behind a cloud. There was less danger of Whang Dixon's noticing, than that one of the riders at their heels would catch on. Polk held his breath as the sharp blade freed his wrists in one stroke. So far, no warning outcry.

They were ascending a low ridge, the pace was a road jog. The moon was still obscured, and Polk brought his left hand forward, gripping Golden Streak's reins as the girl swung close. She dropped off the palomino. Polk's feet were unstirruped, his left leg drawn up and ready to cross the empty saddle. If Nancy had hoped to pass him a gun, there was no time for it. With a lightning swing from one horse to the other, he settled low on Golden Streak, fed him the steel.

Whang Dixon's astonished yell beat upon his ears as he forged ahead, with Whang left holding the reins of the unmounted horse. Then the blast of a gun—and leaden death whispering close. A frantic, high-pitched cry: "I'm Hank Starbuck's daughter—don't shoot!" Evidently Whang Dixon had spied her afoot, surmised that she had had a part in Darleton's breakaway.

Fearful for the girl's safety, Polk twisted in the saddle. He saw her run clear of the dust kicked up by the horses, throwing aside the disguising coat and her hat, so that her hair cascaded to her shoulders. Spotted as she was by moonlight, Dixon could not doubt her sex, though of course he had no acquaintance with Nancy. When the killer's guns sagged, Polk expelled a sharp breath of relief. Dixon shouted angrily at her as his horse lunged on, the words lost to Polk in the roar of hoofs.

The whole van of the cavalcade was in swifter motion, and gun thunder pounded the hoofbeats to a thudding undertone. Polk was stretched along Golden Streak's back and had gained ground during the slight diversion. A few more leaps, twenty feet to a leap, and he was over the ridge-top, while lead plowed the dirt heelsward.

With the wind belting his face, Polk skimmed the reverse slope. What a horse! Golden Streak was running the race of his life, effortlessly, a race of far greater consequence than he had won on the Diamond Tail track. When the leading pursuers crossed the ridge, Polk was an arrow-swift shadow among the sage clumps on the level plain.

He was completely lost sight of for a half hour, and when the seven stockmen and their gun wolves surrounded W Bar M headquarters, they found an empty ranch. House, stable and sheds were torched. Saddle leather squealed again and hoofs pounded. The raiders were heading on toward the next nester outfit. Five miles, beaten out at roaring gallop, for Magoon and Darleton were certain to rouse the range.

AS Whang Dixon turned off the road with his notch cutters, trailed closely by the cattlemen, a shadowy group of nine horsemen waited beneath cottonwoods west of the nester ranch house. The stamping of a horse electrified sharp-eared Dixon. He checked rein, peering at the sound's source. Shouting an order, he jerked guns and kicked in the spurs. Rifle and six-shooter crashed out a volley from the trees. Marauders' saddles were swept clean, horses piled up with shooting riders or swapped ends to retreat.

The confusion was but momentary. This was old business to the hand-picked pistoleers. Dixon led at a gallop for the alamos, reins in his teeth, his Colts drumming. Polk Darleton jumped his horse into flashing flight, still working his gun. With Bob Bender, Curly Dill and the six men belonging to the ranch assaulted, he swept westward out of the grove. An anguished cry pealed from the tail-

end rider. He was down, but shouting for them to go on. Gunfire chopped his voice to silence. First blood for the hair-trigger legion!

Polk hadn't expected to do more than check the advance a little and ride hard—not against such terrific odds. Meantime, on that streak of golden horseflesh, Wash Magoon was far ahead, carrying the call to arms. When Polk had reached the W Bar M ranch house, with the Streak hardly sweating behind the cinch, Wash hadn't waited to hear the bad news through. It wasn't news, really.

"Let me ride the palomino and you ride one of the other horses!" Wash had ordered. "I know the location of every ranch and can make faster time. I'll have out every man able to pack a gun before dawn. You, Polk, get Bob and Curly, and follow me to Simrill's, five mile up the range. The raiders won't stop to bother our cattle now. Join Simrill's outfit and keep movin' west, hittin' the pistoleers as often and as hard as you can!"

The six men that Polk led away from the Simrill ranch soon distanced the hair-trigger legion, a handful of whom stayed behind long enough to fire the house and outbuildings. More gun-toting nesters joined Polk's little party within the next few miles. Magoon had sent them to watch for Darleton retreating over the wagon road. Now numbering a score, they made a brief stand in a boulder field as Dixon and Price led up their forces. And again they drew off when Polk decided pistoleers and stockmen were going to override them if they didn't retreat.

Westward they thundered, with but the loss of one nester cowman. A bunch of thirty range defenders rode out of the trailside brush before they had gone two miles farther. It was not yet dawn when three hundred gun-mad nesters blocked the road.

"They're gettin' too many for us to fight in the open." Whang Dixon declared to the cowmen leaders. "Know any place nearby where we can fort up? If that girl, damn her, hadn't helped that Polk fellow to get away, we wouldn't be in this jackpot!"

"You're speakin' of my daughter!" Hank Starbuck sharply rebuked the gun boss from behind the white hood which extended to his shoulders. All the legion had worn these hoods since jumping the W Bar M. "I'll admit she ought not to have interfered—"

"Damn right she oughtn't, Hank!" snarled Price. "Dixon, there's a ranch up north half a mile and it's likely the owner and his men are out in front of us. Let's try for it."

THE raiders wheeled north. Their horses were failing, but not their ammunition. The pursuing three hundred were unable to head them off from their objective, the abandoned ranch. Hastily dismounting and corraling the animals, or as many as they could, pistoleers and stockmen sought the protection of log walls. Meanwhile the gun-mad nesters arrived in hard-riding bunches, to drop off and surround the ranch.

As day broke, Wash and Polk stood on a grassy knoll. The guns were silent below them, for, inside the house, the invaders held an advantage.

"I don't hone for any more killin' than is necessary, on either side," Magoon said. "I'd be willin' for the sheriff to take charge, but I doubt the rest'll stand for it. One thing is certain—they'll be plenty hungry in a day or two and they're goin' to need water a lot sooner."

Sheriff Rick Granby jogged over from Gunsight, the county seat, when the sun was two hours high. The lawman had just been informed of the gun trouble. He could have cooled his heels and permitted the nesters to finish off their enemies. But that wasn't the way of old Rick after taking oath to maintain law and order.

"How about callin' off your men, Wash?" he asked, locating the leader under a tree, with his pipe going.

"Maybeso Heck Price and them will be glad to go with me and stand trial. They see by now you've got 'em bottled up."

"Rick, it's gone too far," replied Wash. "You've got no more chance of arrestin' the men in that ranch house than you have the three hundred-odd scattered around it."

"No?" The sheriff gathered up his reins. "Well, you fellows were mainly responsible for puttin' me in the saddle, to see that everybody got a square deal. And I'm doin' it, Wash. The Culebra Range is only one section of this county. I can deputize plenty to help me who ain't mixed up in your feud. It may take a day or two, but I'll get 'em!"

Magoon tossed his head. "I hope you have luck."

Little ammunition did the opposing parties waste during the long, hot day. But Cal, eldest of the Ringdon brothers, the only men among the nesters who should have been on the other side, impeded a bullet fatally. The surviving Ringdons, Bill, Shack and Dave held a private war council.

Spilled blood of a Ringdon called for red revenge. They were clannish rascals, and knew of the sheriff's intention to get aid elsewhere in the county when he rode away. Rick Granby was sure to return with all the men he needed, but how soon that would be was anyone's guess. And the Ringdons were going to take no chance of the raiders being rescued. Since they didn't know whose bullet had downed Cal, the death of the whole hair-trigger legion was their aim!

"There's one sure way of blottin' 'em out," declared Bill Ringdon. "That's dynamite! Plenty to be had at Gunsight and no ol' sheriff around to ask what it's for. I'm off, but don't say nothin' to Magoon or anybody."

HE slipped away during the late afternoon, and Shack and Dave were restive as a couple of tigers. They knew Bill couldn't get back before morning, for he'd have to find a wagon to haul the explosive.

There had been an abortive attempt by the besieged to secure water from the well in the ranch yard, while daylight lasted. It was certain the attempt would be repeated after nightfall. The two Ringdon boys crept up in the shadow of the well-curb and lay cat-quiet for an hour before their stealthy maneuver was rewarded. Something might prevent Bill from arriving in time with the dynamite, Shack and Dave had figured, and they were going to make sure that the dead Cal had company "over the range."

Wash Magoon was looking forward to an uneventful night when the banging of six-shooters at the well took him by surprise.

"Another bust-out to get water," he said to Polk Darleton, pulling on his boots and rising from the blanket he had unrolled. "And some of our boys over there stoppin' them. I don't hold with that, exactly, knowin' what thirst is—though I reckon you can't be soft and win a war."

Polk said nothing. He was watching the flashes of gun lightning which showed that the nesters who had ventured into the yard were retreating. Hoofbeats rolled toward the scrub timber where Magoon, Polk and others patrolling the ranch house front were posted. When the horsemen arrived, they were dragging two prisoners at ropes' end, and Shack Ringdon announced to the gathered nesters:

"'Takes we'uns to git 'em! Daylighted two totin' water buckets and roped this pair—had our hosses handy. We'uns didn't hardly git powder-smutted."

He swung to earth, jammed his tottering prisoner against a tree and circled it swiftly, winding the twine about him.

"Where's Bill?" Magoon stepped closer, peering around in the gloom. "What you aimin' to do with that fellow, Shack?"

"Bill wasn't with us," retorted

Shack Ringdon, turning to face him. "What do you care what happens to this polecat? My prisoner, ain't he?"

Magoon didn't answer that. "Build a fire and we'll see who they've caught," he said to the nesters standing around.

"Yeh. It'll save me and Dave the trouble," grunted Shack. "Need any help?" he called to his swearing brother, a few feet away.

Polk and another man were piling brush in a cleared space, but Shack's remark called forth angry remonstrance from Wash before the fire was lighted.

"You ain't goin' to torture them men, Ringdon! What the hell!"

"Not burn 'em, no. But we need light to shoot by!" Crackling flame at that moment revealed the savage distortion of Shack's stubble-blackened features. "Them or some of their gang killed Cal—"

"That don't give you no right to kill 'em by slow degrees, Shack!" Magoon towered in front of the slit-eyed Ringdon. "Nothin' doin', waddy. Make any trouble and we'll put ropes on you!"

Polk, seeing Dave Ringdon glide to his brother's side, swiftly took his stand by Magoon. The Ringdons glanced at the other nesters standing about in the fire-glow, but met with stony stares on every hand. Apparently none was ready to support their contention that, having taken a couple of raider prisoners, they were free to do as they liked with the helpless men.

Shack forced a wolfish grin and spoke out of the side of his mouth:

"We don't stand deuce-high, Dave, do we? Good thing to know who your friends are! C'm'on!" He turned away toward his mount, followed by the low-cursing Dave.

The firelight played over the prisoner bound to the tree and the one left lying on the ground by Dave Ringdon. Magoon stepped over to lock gaze with the hard-faced Whang Dixon, who wore no raider's hood now.

"Your hellin' outfit is out on a crackin' limb," Wash remarked. "I reckon they know it, eh? Too bad the Ringdons couldn't 'a' roped Heck Price or some other big-hat while they was at it."

"I don't count, hey?" snarled Whang. "Let me tell you, mister, you'll do some tall scrappin' to take that bunch yonder."

Magoon turned away. There was no point in arguing with this imported gun hireling. He gave the order to untie Dixon from the tree, so that he might lie down, and stooped briefly over the prisoner on the ground. Ex-Sheriff Dal Kullen held his breath as Magoon's eyes rested on his whiskered face, half in shadow.

"Just another cheap killer," said Wash, rising. "One of you boys camp down beside 'em."

He didn't know that the eyes of Dal followed him as he strode back to the fire, that the prisoner had winced under the lashing scorn of Wash's pronouncement: "Just another cheap killer."

CHAPTER V

Death on Wheels

A QUART of Old Crow, split between them at the peak of their resentment, kept Shack and Dave Ringdon from riding up the trail to Gunsight to warn Bill he'd better turn back. Magoon was running things with his usual high hand and wouldn't tolerate the use of dynamite against their enemies. And, of course, the other nesters would side with him. Hell of a way to conduct a war, the Ringdons agreed, before they stretched out in heavy slumber.

Bleary-eyed, and with stuttering nerves, they awakened to a tumult of voices not far from where they had spread their blankets. It was another day, and they saw a wagon and team,

Bill standing on the dash, waving his arms and endeavoring to make himself heard.

"Hell, he got here!" exclaimed Shack, glancing at Dave out of bloodshot eyes. "We're a coupla cow-brained fools, gettin' soused instead of pitchin' lead intuh them prisoners and headin' up to join Bill. But let's go over."

He picked up his battered hat and gained his feet, Dave trailing him toward the wagon and the clamoring crowd around it. Bill Ringdon didn't observe his brothers at first, and they listened in growing astonishment. Bill had contrived to pitch his voice over that of the mob and get attention.

"If Wash Magoon don't want no hand in dynamitin' them range-grabbers and killers, he can go 'way back and squat, can't he? Sure as hell! It's your last and only chance, boys, of blowin' that gang to hell, where they won't never again bother peaceful range folks tryin' to get along. Now, what do you say?"

The nester crowd's answer put a climax to Shack's and Dave's amazement. They were with Bill to a man! Gradually Bill's brothers came to understand this apparent about-face. Last night some of these same nesters had been unsympathetic when Shack and Dave desired to shoot helpless prisoners apart, but now they were crazy to dynamite a ranchful of men.

Bill had known how to arouse their long-nursed hatred to fever pitch. He pointed out that the raiders who had meant to smoke them off the range would be rescued by the sheriff, any time now, if the nesters didn't take action at once. It was the last chance to destroy enemies that merited killing!

Shack nudged Dave. "Magoon's lost out in this deal! He's tossin' his hands, walkin' off with that bodyguard of his. Big doin's, Dave. And say, nobody ain't watchin' them two prisoners now. Don't let's forget 'em."

Refusing to have any part in dynamiting the raiders, Wash Magoon had stalked off with Polk Darleton by his side. But the nesters, in their aroused mood, paid little heed. They thought that Magoon was leaving in disgust. But when he and Polk had gotten their horses from the rope corral, stretched to tree trunks, they led palomino and bay back toward the grassy knoll overlooking the besieged ranch.

On the way, they passed two men lying on blankets in the shade. Bob Bender and Curly Dill, who were out of the fight with nasty wounds. Bender wanted to know what the yelling was about. And when Wash had explained its significance, both injured cowboys declared themselves opposed to such methods of warfare.

"We don't aim to let it happen, me'n Polk don't," Wash asserted.

"C'mon, the wagon's ready to roll!" called Polk suddenly. He had forged ahead at a walk and now twisted in the saddle excitedly.

MAGOON stepped into Golden Streak's saddle and took after him at a lope. The critical moment had arrived. For the hooded dynamite wagon was rumbling down the far slope into the ranch yard, team at a gallop, no driver on the seat. The horses had been slyly quirted by Bill Ringdon, posted near a front wheel. And evidently the gunmen and cowmen inside the house believed at first that it was a runaway team, not aware of the deadly cargo in the wagon-bed. They couldn't see the rear of the rocking vehicle and the sparking fuse.

But Magoon and Polk, quartering across the slope to overhaul that wagon and turn it from a direct course, had a back view which startled them. They were prepared to see the sputtering fuse coil attached to the cases of dynamite, but not for the fact that two pairs of spur-ended

legs, the ankles lashed together, dangled over the tailgate.

They realized instantly that the gunmen prisoners, left unguarded, had been tossed into the wagon at the last moment, to perish horribly when the exploding vehicle blasted the gang trapped in the ranch house. Of course, the vindictive Ringdons were responsible!

Magoon and Polk spurred hard, desperately. They were far down the slope when sixshooters began talking, higher up, and they hipped sideways, jerking Colts. Bill, Shack and Dave Ringdon were pelting after them afoot, firing as they ran. There was no time to get horses if they wanted to stop Polk and the old cowman, whose intentions were plain. None of the nesters moved to interfere, but lined the top of the slope, watching the men on foot and on horseback swap lead. It looked as though Polk and Walsh would lose that race—possibly their lives!

But Bill Ringdon sprang high, with a stricken yell. When he landed, rolling down the steep grade, Shack wasn't far behind him, tunneled by Polk's hot lead. Dave Ringdon pulled up. But as he was turning to scramble back, gun flame bursting from the Colts of both riders simultaneously, halted him. He tottered, grasped at a tuft of grass as his legs let him down; then plunged a f t e r his brothers.

Still the nesters were silent, their guns inactive. Polk and Magoon were pounding on after the wagon. There was mighty little time until that sputtering fuse should burn down to the detonator caps! The thudding team was halfway across the yard, with the death wagon on its heels, when Polk and Magoon separated.

On the golden stallion, Wash flashed toward the heads of the frantic horses. Polk reined the other way. Though both would now have been easy targets for the men in the ranch house, not a gun popped. It must suddenly have occurred to the besieged what the wagon contained, and they were not so foolish as to interfere with the bold riders bent on saving them from destruction.

Wash swerved the team up the yard, away from the house. As the rear of the wagon rolled by him, Polk Darleton laid hold of a booted leg and jerked back mightily. Whang Dixon slid over the tail-gate, struck hard on his shoulders—but he was tough! Polk's horse was jumping along to the tail-gate. A second bound figure slid into view as the cowboy reached and tugged. His old enemy, the ex-sheriff, unrecognized as yet, dropped in the dust.

"All out, Wash!" Polk yelled, and turned on the space of a dime.

Magoon already was heading back toward the younger man, having lashed the wagon-team again with his quirt. He couldn't save the horses, much as he would have liked to. The wagon was rumbling toward a distant fence. It crashed through. Then a blinding sheet of flame leaped skyward, and the echoing blast sent men and horses staggering.

POLK and Magoon weren't hurt, but stunned. They lay not far from the rescued gunmen while their horses scrambled up and trotted away. Heavy smoke still drifted over the yard and pieces of wagon burned fiercely, when out of the ranch house doorway poured the hair-trigger mob. They scooped up the rescuers' guns and carried the unconscious pair into the house, along with Dixon and Kullen.

It was Heck Price, the Diamond Tail owner, who glared down at the bound nesters when Polk and Wash were able to distinguish faces.

"I'd rather have caught you two than a hundred other nesters!" Price declared savagely. "Why? Because we can make our own terms with that scummy gang outside, by threatenin' to bump you both off if they don't lift the siege. They think a lot of you, Magoon—you're their leader! But

don't count on gettin' away afterward. We'll use you, then cut you out of our path for good'n all!"

Wash crimsoned with rage, Polk's eyes were slits of fury.

"That's a fine reward, Price," rapped Magoon, "for riskin' our skins to keep you from bein' blasted. If the explosion hadn't knocked us out—"

"Wash is sure enough right, Heck!" Hank Starbuck edged up beside the Diamond Tail boss. "They took hellish long chances for us—their enemies. I didn't like this raidin' business from the first, as you know, and I ain't built so that I can stand by and see Wash and the boy killed while they're helpless!"

Wash Magoon turned surprised gaze on Starbuck. "I used to think you were a white man, Hank—you're talkin' like one now."

Heck Price vented a nasty laugh. "Hank'll play hell tryin' to save you! We'll do him up hisself if he gits too funny."

"Wait a mo', there!" cut in the voice of Whang Dixon, the gun boss. He and ex-Sheriff Dal Kullen had been released by their friends. And now they strode from the rear of the man-packed room, where they had been exchanging guarded talk with their followers. Extra gunbelts girded them.

Dixon roughly shoved Price aside, but the look he turned upon Polk and the old cowman was decidedly friendly. Kullen's heavily bearded face gave no hint of his mood.

"What the hell's this—mutiny?" bellowed Price.

"Call it what you damn like," ground out Whang. "We're lettin' these fellows go back to their friends safe, understand? They run awful chances, like Starbuck said, to drag us out of that wagon, and last night the oldster prevented us two from gettin' shot piecemeal, over in their camp. Ain't it so?" he appealed to Kullen.

Kullen nodded, and instantly stooped to cut the ropes from the two nesters. Their guns were stuck in his waistband, and as Polk and Wash rose from the floor, he handed each a weapon.

"They're loaded," he said briefly.

Both nesters were staring at him. There was something familiar about Kullen that had them guessing.

But before either could speak, Price's yell shook the room: "Boys, we ain't goin' to let 'em go on Dixon's say-so, are we?"

The cattlemen and cowboys of the raiding party, all but Starbuck and his men, had been grouping together instinctively, and the grim gunmen of Dixon tensed for action. They were spread out in advantageous positions, as Whang had directed. For the night-riding cowmen they had only contempt.

As Whang had insisted on payment in advance, for the night's work that failed, the gun crew had nothing to lose by turning on the men who hired them. The release of Magoon and his cowboy meant that the gunmen could ride out of there, before the sheriff returned. And they knew the seven stockmen had lost their war already.

WHANG DIXON answered Price's appeal to the roomful by pivoting, guns in hand. Flame pulsed from the right-hand weapon and Heck, with gun half drawn, went into a heel-spin and struck the floor, lifeless. His drop had the effect of a lighted match tossed into a powder keg.

Cowmen and punchers filled their hands. But the gun-notchers in that big living room were quicker. Roaring .45's tuned a deadly melody, men reeled and went down in the thickening smoke. At pointblank range, not many bullets failed to kill outright. Hank Starbuck had changed sides, but none could have called him a traitor—he was proving his manhood. Packy and his cowboys were shooting, shoulder to shoulder with the clan of Dixon.

Polk and Wash, hunched on the

floor, used their guns effectively. Dal Kullen was crouched near, almost as though he sought to protect them. But suddenly his legs turned rubbery and he sank down within reach of Magoon's hand. He wasn't dead, but dying, lay with wide eyes on Wash's face. And as the battling men spilled into the yard through doorway and windows, Wash hitched himself nearer Kullen and bent over him.

Young Darleton fired his last bullet into the raider cowmen's ranks. As his cartridge belt had been taken and he couldn't reload, he did not follow the fighters yardward immediately. The gunning outside increased in vigor, added to which was a pounding of hoofs, and he thought the sounds indicated that the nesters had jumped into the fight. But it was the posse of old Rick Granby that had arrived.

Magoon flung a wild glance upward as Polk joined him beside the dying Kullen. The latter had been speaking in a faint voice.

"Know who this is, Polk?" cried Wash. "It's Tom—my boy, Tom!"

The old cowman, on his knees, turned back to the bearded outlaw and tried gently to remove his shirt. Speechless with surprise, Polk sprang to help.

"No use, pap." Tom Magoon smiled faintly. "I'm slated to go—it's just as well. Only I'm glad I could do a turn for you at the last. I never was much good, pap. Polk can tell you about a little shootin' in Largo Valley—"

"Largo Valley?" repeated Darleton, getting his second surprise. "You sorta reminded me of—"

"Yeh, I'm the Geronimo sheriff you knew as Dal Kullen." Tom's lips moved slowly, with effort. "You didn't kill me, Polk, as you see. No reward posted for you. The Largo Valley cowmen, led by Hindman, came to lynch me while I was laid up wounded, havin' discovered runnin'-irons in my office. But I escaped, and knowin' no honest business, I hired out as a gunman for this range war when some fellow from Heck Price dropped into Arizona, to enlist a bunch of notch cutters.

"Funny how our trails crossed again! But when I heard pap was one of the men we were to fight—well, I thought of quittin' right away or goin' over to the old man's side. But I didn't want him to see what I'd become—a gunslingin' renegade. First a claim jumper up in the Hardpan diggin's, after that a tinhorn gambler, then a crooked sheriff in Arizona, and now—"

"Tom," Magoon interrupted brokenly, "you can make a comeback— start over. Just live, Tom."

"Too many counts against me. It's best to go out this way." He coughed rackingly, spattering his shirt with crimson froth. And he died without uttering another word.

Polk left the old man squatted beside the body, stalked to the doorway and peered out. He was surprised to see so many strangers in the yard, until he recognized Sheriff Granby, which explained their presence. Some of the posse were chasing the surviving gunfighters, who had reached a corral and taken out their horses. Polk saw Whang Dixon jump a fence, forking his horse bareback.

THE sheriff had rounded up the cattlemen and cowboy in a milling group, and they had thrown aside their guns. All but the Starbuck outfit, who seemed to be assisting Granby's possemen. As for the nesters of Magoon's party, they were keeping their distance since the sheriff had the situation in hand. The comparative few of their enemies who remained after that smoke-fest with Dixon's gunnies would trouble them no more, and the leaders faced a jail sentence.

Hank Starbuck spied Polk standing in the doorway, and stepped up on the porch, asking: "Where's Wash?"

Polk told him about Tom Magoon,

and Nancy's father blinked his surprise.

"So his boy came home at last!" Hank dubbed his ear. "Too bad it had to be thataway. Wash often spoke of him. I won't disturb the old fellow now. I just wanted to say—"

"Here comes your daughter!" Polk exclaimed, pointing over the stockman's shoulder. Yet he found it hard to believe that the skirted rider spurring across the yard really was Nancy.

Dismounting, she sped up the porch steps and flung herself into Hank's ready arms.

"I couldn't wait another minute to see you!" she cried. "I was sure this expedition would fail—it should, too! But I was afraid you'd be killed. How are you, dad?"

"Not hurt, anyway," he replied soberly. "I've been thinkin' for a good while I ought to cut loose from Price and his friends, not likin' their greedy ways. I done so today, and not too late, I hope. I have to go with Sheriff Granby, like the rest. But I'll be back, Nancy—a man with different ideas about the rights of his neighbors. I wanted to tell Wash, but you can do it for me—you and this upstandin' young cowhand, Darleton. You know him, and—" the rancher's eyes twinkled as he turned to Polk— "I believe you must like him a bit, considerin' what you risked to mount him on that palomino the other night. Good-by, all!"

Nancy Starbuck found her hand in Polk's.

"I can't thank you enough for—what your father just spoke of," Polk said vibrantly. "Your act really saved the little cowmen, and it sure squared that other deal, when you gave me away."

"And the name's Darleton—not the Driftin' Kid?" Her eyes expressed a warm interest.

"Polk Darleton. I didn't use my right name because I was—well, I thought I'd killed a sheriff, over in Arizona. But I hadn't—only wounded him. And he was Tom Magoon, Wash's son, usin' an alias. I see you don't understand—you wouldn't. It'll take some hefty explainin'."

Slow footsteps in the doorway behind them made both turn, to see Wash standing there. He brushed a hand wearily across his eyes.

"Seems like," he said, "that things have been movin' too fast for me to keep track of 'em. Ain't that Sheriff Granby out yonder?"

"Sure is. The war's over," Polk said happily. "You know Miss Starbuck, Wash."

"I do that," Magoon summoned a ghost of a smile. "She's an all-wool article. And Hank, too, proved himself good at bottom today. Where is he?"

"Left a message for you," replied Polk, and spoke steadily for several minutes.

Magoon nodded. "I'll go to court myself and put in a good word for him. As for the others, let 'em take what's comin'. It can't be too bad! We've won our fight, Polk. You'll have to be a son to me, now Tom's—" His voice failed and Polk laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

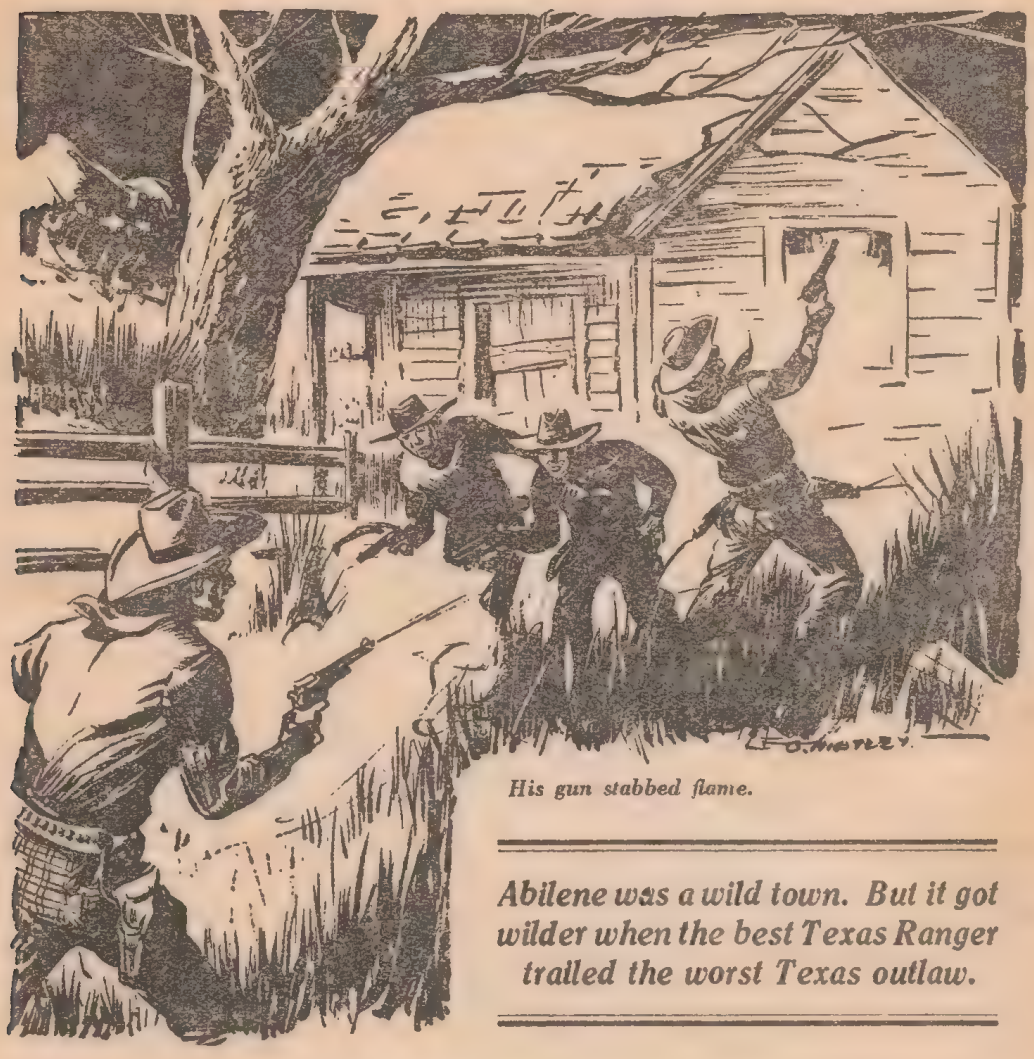
The nesters were dispersing to their homes as Sheriff Granby rode with his prisoners toward Gunsight. Last of all to leave the battleground were Magoon, riding the palomino, with Tom's lolling head against his shoulder—Tom would rest from his wanderings in his father's dooryard—and the faithful Bender and Dill, one on either side of the sorrowing rancher. Polk and Nancy Starbuck brought up the rear, their stirrup leathers rubbing.

"Now that I really know you, Polk," the girl said with a familiarity which delighted the cowboy, "I'm sure we'll be the best of friends."

"And maybe more than friends," he replied, in a hopeful tone.

"Who knows?" she smiled at him. "You may be right, Driftin' Kid!"

The Wild Town Tophand



His gun stabbed flame.

Abilene was a wild town. But it got wilder when the best Texas Ranger trailed the worst Texas outlaw.

By Richard Sprang

IT was about an hour after sundown when they jumped him. All along the dust-fogged length of Texas Street the jerry-built structures of pine and tin and canvas poured out glaring light and uproarious confusion. Barkers lifted their strident yells. Hurdy-gurdies, mandolins, and fiddles blared their resonant gallopade, beckoning the men who jammed this street from wall to wall, from beginning to end.

They were a lusty crew, these Abilene men — ex-soldiers; politicians, with puffy pale eyes; tradesmen; con men; gamblers, with embroidered waistcoats; gunmen; hoboes; Texas men, saddle-lean and reckless; land sharks and doctors; lush workers and adventurers.

They answered the barkers' plea. They poured in a steady flux into the throbbing and clangorous houses. Chattering, cursing, shouting, charg-

ing the fine air with taut desperation, they filled it with the sight and smell of red lights and raw whisky.

A Long Trail mushroom, this was Abilene, one hundred and sixty miles from Kansas City, bellowing and blaring to the shocked Comanche moon its claim of being the wickedest city on earth.

And here they jumped him, this Don Ridgeway. Jumped him and nearly beat his brains out of him, convincing him of the truth of old Mike Peddigrew's warning: "Ranger, beware of Abilene!"

Don Ridgeway was passing Phil Coe's and Ben Thompson's Bull's Head Saloon at a fast, swinging stride. His lean and flat-muscled body cut through the crowd, his blue eyes alive, his lips set in a long tough smile. Don Ridgeway was looking for a man. But that man didn't know it. Nobody in Abilene knew—not even Marshal Sam Smith—that Texas Ranger Ridgeway was finally after Brose Hardin.

That was the way Ridgeway worked. Silent, unknown, confiding in no one, he trailed his man from here to hell-and-gone, if need be, and brought him back dead or alive. And that was why old Captain Mike Peddigrew counted Don Ridgeway as his best man.

Texas' best ranger after Texas' worst outlaw, leader of the Hardin Bunch. A fearsome name that. From San Antonio to Ogalalla they robbed and killed the Texas drovers. For two years Brose Hardin blasted his rapacious way until he and his wild bunch were the talk of every trail town. And now the rangers had sent Don Ridgeway to get him.

Stentorian bedlam pounded all around him. With their buzzing whirl of insects the kerosene lanterns and the guttering flares made a wavering, uncertain light. Men leaned against the lamp posts. The walk was swarming, and the street choked with buggies, sulkies, wagons and horsemen. Nothing in this night was conducive to the keen-eared alertness Don Ridgeway always maintained. Everything was conducive to the safe execution of skulking men's plans.

Because he wanted to draw no unnecessary attention to himself, Don Ridgeway had checked his gun as everyone did under Marshal Sam Smith's regime.

And so it happened that Don Ridgeway was jumped. Not because he was Don Ridgeway, ranger, but just because he was a man who happened to be at a certain place at a certain time. A tool that could be used—a puppet of Fate.

It happened with the swiftness of a gun-flash. A cracking blow whipped against the back of his neck in a paralyzing rabbit punch. Strong hands held his sagging body, bore it between the Bull's Head and the shack next door. All so silently and fast that no one on the walk knew it had happened.

RIDGEWAY was stunned, half blinded, almost senseless. The powerful hands still held him up. Another hand — clenched — struck his face, whipped the smoke from his brain, jerked it alive. Instantly he hurled himself at the man in front of him, a short black shape in the alley's darkness. He smashed out at him, caught him with a wallop sounding like the crack of lead against stone.

Then a knee rammed into Ridgeway's back, and the pair of hands that had held him up roped around his neck, tightened until pain shot down his spine. The fellow's knee ground ever deeper until Ridgeway thought the bone must snap. Sweat beaded on his face. The little globules loosened with the electric quiver of his straining muscles and trickled down to his mouth, filming his lips with a bitter salt taste.

Don Ridgeway gathered every ounce of strength his big-boned body possessed. He nursed it for one fleeting instant, then released it into straining muscles. It whipped them taut, and with one mighty heave and twist he

was free, and turning to smash this fellow's face down his throat.

But in that savage second Ridgeway had all the savagery driven out of him. From the darkness something smashed against his skull with the sharp jangle of breaking glass. Biting, fiery liquid poured down his face and soaked his shoulders. The stench of it prickled his nostrils as his senses ebbed away, even as the momentum of his rush smashed him into the man and carried them both to the ground.

Vaguely he felt the man crawl from beneath him. A gunshot sounded as from a great distance. Something hard and cold was shoved into his hand and his fingers were wrapped around it. And then there was the swift retreat of footsteps, and the swelling murmur of many voices. From beginning to end this battle had lasted twenty seconds.

He came to his knees, bracing himself with his arms. He waited for the pounding in his skull to lessen, then drew up one knee. Levering on it, he came erect and leaned against the Bull's Head wall. The lighted square of the alley's mouth swayed and jumped before him. Pain was a keen searing blade through his head, and the odor rising from his soaked shoulders nauseated him.

The lighted square at the alley's mouth began to steady. He could make out the forms of men there, and he could hear their voices, suddenly angry. And then they were coming toward him. He lifted his hands and discovered he still held the hard object. Some one grabbed his shirt front and he struck at the man. But the motion unbalanced him and he stumbled against another.

"He's drunk!"

"Hell, yes! Smell the liquor!"

"Look out! He's still got his gun!"

Through his whirling senses, Don Ridgeway heard these shouts. Two men got him from behind, jerked the gun from his hand, and hustled him to the street. The guttering lights struck him across the eyes. He closed them. Opened them, and saw a man lying huddled on the walk beneath a lamp post.

A black-bearded man gripped Ridgeway's shoulder, pinned him with a pair of black little eyes.

"You shot him. Why?"

A growl went up from the crowd now jamming this space. "Who cares why!" some one yelled. "String 'im up!" The growl thickened to a roar —the blood roar of a mob. "Lynch him! Lynch him!"

Don Ridgeway's head was clearing now. He stood straight upon the plank walk, his saddle-hardened figure jutting above them. His black, curly hair was a mass of blood. The left side of his bronzed face showed blood and dirt. His shirt was torn all the way to his belt, exposing the full flat sweep of his chest.

Tight-lipped, he raked this mob with his eyes—blue with silver flakes in them that might have been reflections of the lights or might have been sparks of pure fury. Everything about him was alert, bitter, hard. The men nearest him stopped their clamor. Silence began to expand over the entire crowd.

Don Ridgeway singled out a middle-aged cowman. "Where's Sam Smith?"

"He'll be here."

A MURMUR again swelled over the street. But it stilled instantly. A rider on a gray horse was coming through the mob, splitting it like a plow splits sod.

Don Ridgeway had never seen Sam Smith before. But he had heard tales of the little man who never killed unless killing was the very last resort, yet who tamed this wildest of all trail towns. And as Ridgeway saw him now he could believe those stories.

Marshal Sam Smith stopped his horse before Ridgeway, sitting easily in the saddle, briefly studying this group before speaking. All his features were powerful, steady. His gray eyes very attentive, very grave. The crowd was absolutely still.

Sam Smith said: "What is it, Gore?"

The black-bearded man spoke quietly. "We heard a shot and this man fell dead. We looked in the alley and this fellow was there with a gun in his hands, stumblin' around. He smells like he was swimmin' in a barrel of Old Crow."

Sam Smith fixed his stare on Don Ridgeway. That frigid gaze brought a definite sense of danger to the ranger. He tipped his head up at Smith.

"I was jumped by two men. They overpowered me, broke a bottle of whisky on my head and shot this man. They put the gun in my hand."

"You're drunk," the black-bearded man said. "You were staggerin' like a blown horse."

"I'm not staggering now, am I?"

Sam Smith said: "Can you describe the two men?"

"I can't," Don answered. "It was too dark."

A murmur ran over the crowd, sneering, unbelieving. All this time no change had stirred Sam Smith's face.

Now he said simply: "You will come with me."

In front of the Bull's Head a gasp suddenly knifed the silence. Don glanced that way, tensed. A man stood on a barrel against the wall. A tall man, stocky and range garbed. His face was burned a deep bronze. The high placed lights made deep shadows under his brow and nose and lips. But a lower flare picked flecks of yellow from his eyes, creating a definite sense of anger and wildness about him that turned every face toward him. He held a gun hip-high.

The black-bearded man groaned: "Brose Hardin!"

But Don Ridgeway knew his identity. Every ranger was familiar with those reckless features. Yet Brose Hardin, leader of the rapacious Hardin Bunch, didn't know him. Of that he was certain. The outlaw's gun never wavered from Sam Smith's body. And when he spoke he talked directly to the marshal as though there were no others on the street.

"I'm relievin' you of the task, Sam," he drawled. "I'll take him with me."

Just like that. There was no objection, no parley. Sam Smith was a sensible man.

Brose Hardin said: "Bring a horse over here."

A man untied a horse and led it to the barrel. Hardin was in the saddle instantly, his gun never wavering.

Don Ridgeway walked to the rail, swung up on a roan. The two riders backed into the alley and soon disappeared. Sam Smith turned his gray and went down the street. There was an awful silence.

CLOSE by the Kansas-Pacific loading chutes at the south end of town, a small windowless shack huddled in the darkness. Cattle smell was very strong. Inside the hut a kerosene lamp poured gold light over the warped boards, the dirty floor, and the two men seated at the pine table.

Brose Hardin nodded as Don Ridgeway again finished his story of the shooting. Hardin was slouched in his chair, his long fingers playing with a match stick. He broke it and looked up.

"Look," he said, "this thing figures pretty plain. You know who I am, and I suppose your opinion ain't high—not that I give a damn."

Don Ridgeway shrugged.

"Yeah," the outlaw nodded. "Well, Brose Hardin is known as the toughest damn hombre in these parts. Humph! He's the bloody boy of the Long Trail. The Hardin Wild Bunch. Hell! This is funny. Look, fellow, I don't know who you are. But you were dragged into this so you're gonna hear somethin' that would amaze the whole Territory—if they'd believe it."

He leaned back, laid his palm flat on the table, watched Don Ridgeway through narrow, sun-creased lids.

"I was in a shooting scrape over at Hays City about two years ago," Hardin explained. "It was pretty hot and

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pretty bad. A couple of fellows who called me friend, got hold of that and built it up until everybody thought I was the wildest *buscadero* north of the Rio. They had me tied pretty, but I didn't care. Thought it was swell. Proud an' young, y'know. Well, they set me up as the leader of a wild bunch. Named it after me. And because of my built-up rep our outfit was feared plenty.

"Time went by and the Hardin Bunch pulled some high jobs. I was in deep, but I never killed a man, so help me! Those two guys who started it did the planning. I was the—well, figurehead. Philchuck and Orchard are their names and more rotten men never lived. Finally we pulled so many jobs that I knew it couldn't last, and when it did blow up I would be the sucker. Then my young brother came out from the East. He thought I was in the cattle business. He was right."

Hardin's lips turned down and his eyes chilled. His voice rode deeper and the hand on the table clenched as he stared at the lamp. Ridgeway thought he had never seen another man so utterly angered, yet so controlled.

"The kid found out too much," Hardin went on. "Philchuck and Orchard said he'd have to join. I wouldn't have it. I told 'em I was through. I told the kid to meet me tonight at the American Hotel and we'd leave this country for good. The men who jumped you were Philchuck and Orchard. The dead man is—my brother."

Ridgeway stiffened.

"You were just framed," Hardin said in a flat, dead voice. "Just somebody that happened to be at the right place at the right time. I didn't want your neck twisted to let those devils have an out. Catch the train when it leaves tonight, an' ride."

Ridgeway shook his head without answering and the silence was deep. It was quite plain to Ridgeway—the outlaws waiting in the alley, waiting for the brother to come by. Then seeing him pass and stop by the lamp

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

post. Ridgeway comes along, they grab him, beat him so that he's dizzy, easily taken for a drunk. Then shooting the brother and running, leaving Ridgeway smelling of whisky, framed perfectly. Yes, it was plain.

A down-wash of wind brought the faint clamor of Abilene's dance halls through the wall. Somewhere to the south cattle bawled on the bedground. And this story of Brose Hardin's. Pretty far-fetched. Yet—

Hardin started to drum his fingers on the table. Finally he raised his eyes to Ridgeway.

"Well," he asked, "what're you waiting for?"

Ridgeway said: "I don't like to be branded with a running iron. There're two men I want to see."

Hardin's glance sharpened. "Philchuck and Orchard are still in town."

"Who else?"

"Maybe two-three."

Don Ridgeway studied Brose Hardin a long moment. Finally he spoke. "My gun's checked at Hershal's store."

RIDGEWAY and Hardin walked down the alley between Hershal's store and Gorden's drug shop. A big black-handled Colt now rode on Ridgeway's thigh. This passageway was thoroughly black, running as it did two blocks from Texas Street. Music tinkled down the wind and the clamor of voices rose over the whole town. But out here they were muffled, windstretched. The soft murmur of Ridgeway's and Hardin's footsteps made a much more definite sound.

As they walked the wind grew from the south, sending ragged clouds blackly under the Comanche moon, and lifting a sighing reverberation as it rushed along the walls of the buildings. Sage smell ran up from the southern plains and cattle smell and kitchen smoke blended into it, making the night air pungent.

They crossed a street flanked solidly by quiet houses. One lamp poured a

(Continued on page 108)

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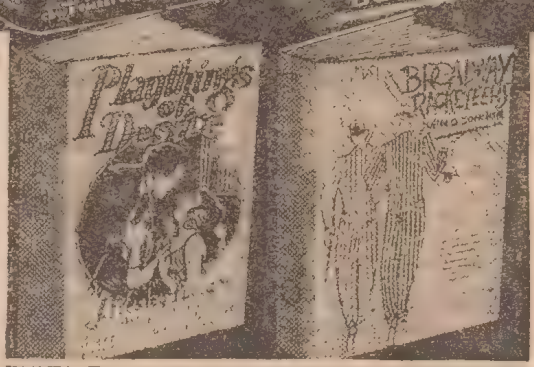

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(Continued from page 106)

pool of gold onto the dust of a distant intersection. This they avoided, clinging to the shadows as darker shadows. The stockyards were off to the right and they headed toward them. The far-off, dismal call of a train whistle quavered in the east. As they crossed the tracks the coming train's pinpoint headlamp winked in the night's blackness.

In the obscure distance little shacks cut darkly against the plain. From one of them golden light glimmered through the cracks of its siding. Hardin swung eastward and Ridgeway followed until another alley opened before them. They entered, hearing the noise of the upper town more and more dimly. A stable stood at the end of the lane bordered by a high board fence.

Close to the wall Hardin stopped and pushed against the fence. A door swung before them, showing the lighted shack directly across a weed-choked yard. Low hulks of wagons bulked against the light and by one of these they took their stand. Hardin picked up a stone, tossed it across the twenty-yard space. It clicked against the shack door and with the sound he spoke in an easy, flat running voice:

"Philchuck—Orchard."

The wind crossed the enclosed space without dropping into it, and in the odd quiet every sound was a sharp, live thing. The train made a deeper rumble as it approached the Abilene yards. Clouds were piling blacker over the sky. No sound came from the shack. In it were the key men of the Hardin Bunch. The rapid thought touched Ridgeway that every ranger in Texas would give his right eye to be in his place tonight.

Hardin tossed another pebble and the light faded instantly, leaving the yard absolutely black. Don Ridgeway eased the gun in its holster, stood very still three yards from the outlaw he was supposed to arrest. Again Hardin called:

"Philchuck—Orchard."

And from the shack's blackness an answer lifted softly: "Well?"

Brose Hardin's voice ran a little higher. "Philchuck," he said, a restrained violence tempering each word, "you killed your last man when you shot my brother."

The running wheels of the K.P. train rolled a metallic wash of sound across the dark, dimmed a little by the rising wind. Hardin shifted his boots in the dust. He drew away from Ridgeway, creating more of a triangle with Hardin and himself posting the bottom points and the shack locating the top.

Philchuck laughed gutturally. "You want trouble?"

Ridgeway spoke for the first time. "Do you think that you can give us any?"

Silence held the shack and Ridgeway knew that to those in it, it was a shocked silence. Finally the man spoke.

"Who're you?"

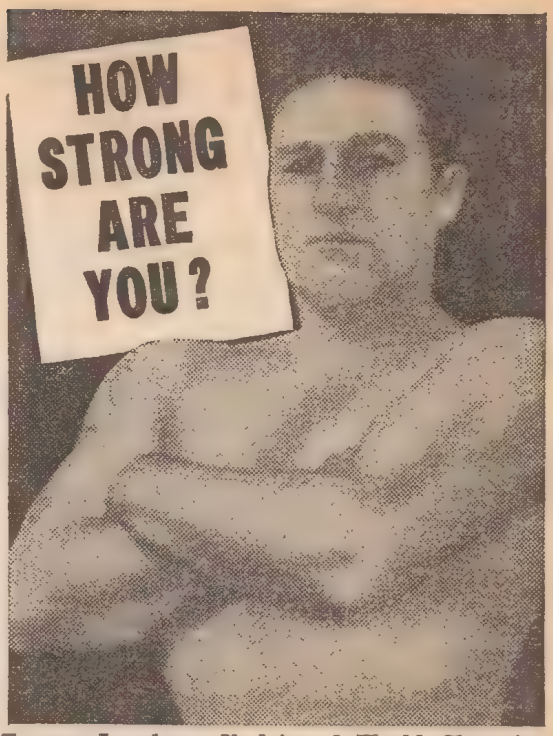
"Your friend from the Bull's Head alley."

Hardin's talk was impatient. "Bring out your help and we'll have a party."

THE train was drawing near, its clatter swelling. Yet in this isolated yard strained silence hung like a pall. Finally Hardin threw his voice like a bullet.

"You and Orchard are sons of sheep. Come out here and blat, damn you!"

Ridgeway was beside a wagon, yet he couldn't see it. He couldn't see Hardin, he couldn't see the shack. On the sound of Hardin's last word, a shot exploded, pumped a quick bombing echo into the yard's stealthy calm. The sound whipped swiftly away on the overhead wind. But the sharp glow of the muzzle flash stamped itself on Ridgeway's brain. He lifted his gun and threw his shot upon it, swinging with the drop of the hammer and stopping four yards from his original position.



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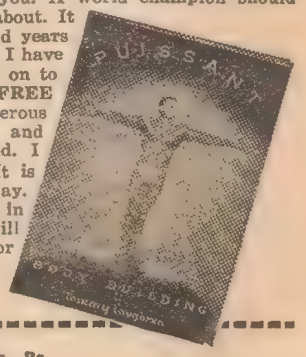

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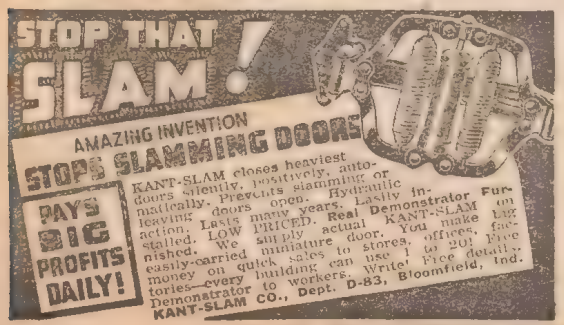
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Hardin's gun was beating up steady reports from the left. He was apparently reckless of the target his gun flashes made. Two more guns opened from the shack with a shuddering bellow, and Ridgeway held his gun on the building. He fired at every flash, the reports blaring wickedly across Abilene. Then his piece clicked dry.

On that instant a call drove from the shack: "Rush 'em!" And running feet sounded in the darkness.

Ridgeway reloaded swiftly, and glimpsed one shadow coming at him. He fired at it and saw the shadow melt into the weeds. Then a bullet whistled at his shoulder, and another followed nearer. Muzzle light bloomed directly before him in quick orange blobs. He crouched and pumped two shots directly on them and drove forward. He heard the whole yard boil alive with gunfire and yelling men.

Powdersmoke made its tangy smell. Slugs rasped through the wood of the wagon, screamed off iron fittings. He stumbled over the man he had first dropped and went to his knees. Off to the left he glimpsed a running glow of gunfire, heard Hardin's cursing voice.

The wind was rolling ever higher, throwing the ragged bulk of clouds swiftly across the sky. Suddenly the moon was exposed and a soft deceptive light filled this place. Two men were crouching before the shack, and another was running off to the right, making for the high fence.

Ridgeway swung his barrel and drove a shot at him and heard the low choking whine as the man tumbled and rolled. The two at the shack opened up, filling this night with a swelling bedlam of crashing explosions. Ridgeway fell flat, resting his elbow on the ground, letting it hinge to the buck of his gun. Through the network of weeds he saw one man go down in a twisting staggering spin. The other fled around the wall.

Reloading, Ridgeway threw his glance toward Hardin's position. He saw the man still up against a wagon.

His hat gone, his gun stabbing flame at a man actually running toward him. At that moment the moon disappeared and blackness rushed down. But Ridgeway had glimpsed another man coming at him, twisting and turning as he ran, but coming with a gun spouting red.

A bullet whined at his hair. Another picked his sleeve and turned him swinging. There was a warm wetness on his arm. Ridgeway brought his gun up to the flashes and placed one shot there, but counted it a miss and swung on. He dug his heels into the loose ground and felt the little whips of air beat at his face as bullets continued to pass.

He crouched and went down on one knee, breathing hard, feeling the hub of the wagon's wheel against his back. Posted that way, Ridgeway let drive three spaced shots at the man, and got one bullet in answer. Then all was absolutely still in the yard, only the clamor of the train sounding as it stopped before the distant station.

DON RIDGEWAY came to his feet slowly. He reloaded and passed from the wagon to the place he had last seen Hardin. But he saw nothing now and, strangely, felt nothing. He called softly: "Hardin."

"Here—over here."

Ridgeway reached him and they waited one full minute, speaking no word.

Then Hardin called: "Philchuck—Orchard." And though they waited another minute no reply came. Ridgeway struck a match and held it at arm's length, but no shot came.

"You hurt?" Ridgeway asked.

"Hit a couple places, but I'll live. How many was they?"

"About six in all."

They moved over the yard, lighting matches here and there. Finally they met at the fence door.

"Five down—for good. Philchuck an' Orchard included."

Don Ridgeway rubbed his hand across his eyes, leaned on the fence.

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If Hardin could have seen him now he might have wondered why that brown face was so very grim, so thoughtful. But Hardin didn't see him.

He said in a dead voice: "Well, fellow, we did something here. Something big. The Hardin gang is through. They'll murder no more. The rangers should give us a medal."

Hardin laughed tonelessly. "Yeah. Only medal they'd give me would be a little round lead one."

The quick clatter of running feet grew from uptown. Steam roared from the safety cocks of the engine at the station.

"There's your train," Ridgeway said.

"Train?"

Ridgeway rubbed his cheek. "Yes, I think you'd better take it to the end of the line—and then on to Arizona, maybe."

The moon came out again. Soft blue light painted Brose Hardin's cheeks. His eyes were bright, with a growing alertness. Hardin's gaze went into Ridgeway, searching, thoughtful, winkless. He licked his lips and looked aside. Don Ridgeway held out his hand.

"The train—you'd better be moving. I'll take care of your—brother."

Their hands clasped. Their eyes met and held for a slow traveling second. Something lighted in them, but they found no further words to say. Brose Hardin suddenly tightened his grip, released it. He wheeled and charged down the alley at a fast, swinging stride.

The running feet were very near, and the train sent two sharp whistle blasts across the wind. By the glow of the street lamp near the tracks, just before he disappeared, Brose Hardin stopped and threw one long glance back.

Don Ridgeway turned and headed uptown to tell Marshal Sam Smith the story of the ranger who was not bringing back his man.

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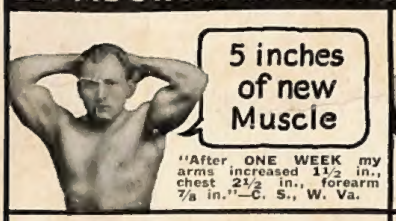

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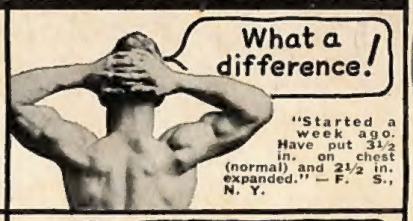

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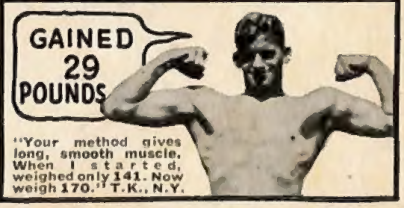

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